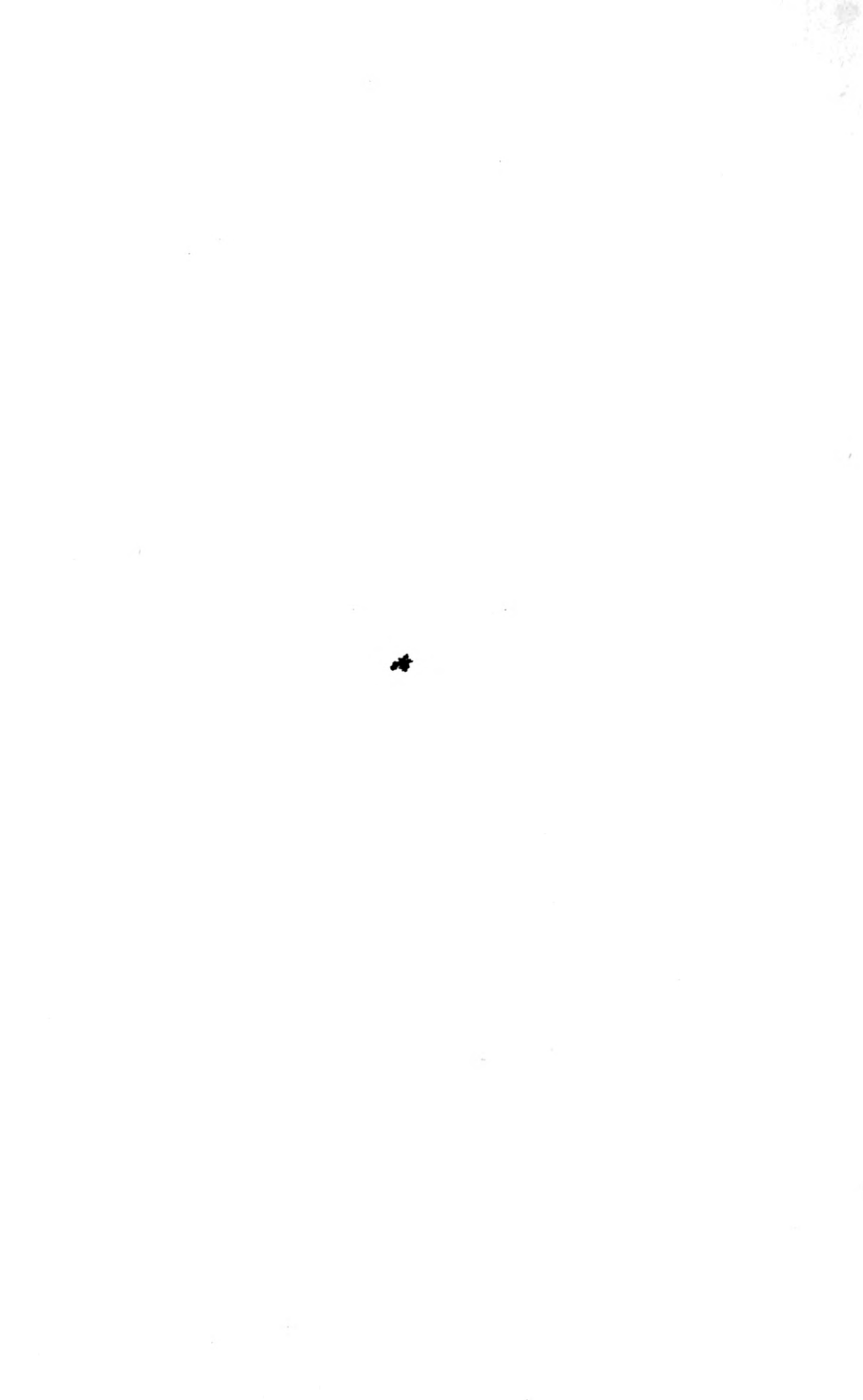




A. J. P. Evans



ALAN DERING.

BY

HON. MRS. FETHERSTONHAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "KILCORRAN," "KINGSDENE," "ROBIN ADAIR."

"Rather the ground that's deep enough for graves,
Rather the stream that's strong enough for waves,
Than the loose sandy drift
Whose shifting surface cherishes no seed,
Either of any flower or any weed,
Whichever way it shift."

OWEN MEREDITH.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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ALAN DERING.



INTRODUCTION.

It was late on a summer afternoon, and a hot June sun was blazing down on the long and dusty highway, which would, about a mile on, lead into the neighbouring county town of Heversham. At this point of the road a massive stone archway marked the turning off of a side way into the beautiful park of Beechwarden, and it now gave its cool and welcome shelter to a tired little figure crouching under its shadow, and listening dreamily to the whispering sighs which rustled

through the branches of the grand old beech trees surrounding her, and from which the place had taken its name.

A sunburnt, dark-eyed little gipsy girl was this, apparently ; her clothes were coarse and woefully tattered, but clean ; and the battered straw hat, which sat with such a rakish cock on one side of her unkempt head, had evidently seen better days ere it wandered through sunshine, storm, and rain, with this little wanderer of the earth, "homeless, ragged, and tanned."

The arms of the stately Dumaresques, and still prouder Derings, looked down from the old grey archway in haughty contempt on this presumptuous waif and stray, which dared to lean its weary head against their cold magnificence ; but the child was content, and recked little of aught else in the world so long as it

could rest its tired limbs until the sun's rays had lessened somewhat at least in intensity.

With her knees drawn up to her chin, and her small brown hands clasped round the former, she sat staring intently at a large white placard which some bill-poster had stuck upon a wooden shed opposite to her. Slowly she spelt out the announcement that the "world-renowned circus of Messrs. Pantaloni would appear at Heversham for that night only," and laboriously her eyes travelled steadily down the list of attractions set forth on the programme until they reached a line which contained only five words: "First appearance of little Madge."

The red blood rushed into the weary little face, the dark eyes flashed fire, and as the child's hands unclasped themselves

from her knees, and she rose with a vague feeling of astonishment to approach nearer the object of her interest, a proud murmur of "That's my name!" burst forth from her lips.

She too had her stake in the world now; she too might play out her little play on its great stage, as well as those many other actors and actresses which already jostled each other day and night upon it. And Madge raised her sunburnt head with childish pride, nodding contemptuously back at the grim and stately coats of arms which had seemed to deride her; and, with a murmur of "the good time 'll come yet, maybe," she resumed her way once more with sturdy little steps towards the town, where already the "Company" of which Messrs. Pantaloni's circus consisted had arrived and taken up its quarters, and were preparing

all things for a great entertainment to be given that evening, under the patronage of the nearest magnate, Mr. Dumaresque, of Beechwarden.

And as the child passed from out the shadow into the sunlight again, the grand old beech trees waved their green branches softly to and fro, seeming to say, "God speed, God speed!" to the weary little wayfarer as she left their cool refreshing shade and wandered out into the hot and dusty world once more.

* * * * *

Six hours later, and the brilliantly illuminated circus is crowded. The manager, taking a surreptitious view of the audience, smiles complacently as he watches the seats filling steadily, and glances with much satisfaction at certain "reserved seats" on the right, which had

been curtained off expressly for the use of the patron of the night. The front row of these is occupied by three children alone—a slim, dark-haired boy of fifteen, with a younger boy beside him, and farther on, a flaxen-haired, blue-eyed girl of ten, who all three chatter and laugh in merry glee at the sights and sounds before them. The clown's jokes are not stale to *them*, the gold is not glitter only, and the bright colours and tinsel, the beautiful pink and white goddesses on spotted Arabian steeds, the striped harlequins in fools' caps and bells, are one and all received with enthusiastic clapping of hands and ringing laughter by these youthful and still unsatiated minds.

The evening is growing later, and the performance seems at last all but concluded, when into the circus arena is led a little white pony, and riding on it a

small shining figure, resplendent in star-covered apparel of silvery white. Few would recognise in this gorgeous fairy the sunburnt tatterdemalion so lately resting her weary limbs against the rich man's gates; but "Little Madge" it is in truth—and the hour of her *début* has come.

Not a shadow of fear is in the child's face, as faster and faster the white pony flies round, and she stands erect on the saddle with bright burning cheeks and flashing eyes, and her dark hair streaming down about her shoulders; and as she bounds through paper hoops, and performs demi-volte after demi-volte, the crowd roar and clap their hands in vociferous approval, and the manager smiles a satisfied smile as he notes the success which this new "attraction" is likely to prove.

“Oh, if I could but do that too!” murmurs the little flaxen-haired girl in the reserved seats above, clasping her hands in ecstasy.

“She’s lovely!” “She’s like a fairy!” burst forth simultaneously from each of the boys beside her.

And the little circus-rider hears all, and smiles up at them brightly as she rides on and on, for what cause has she to envy those above her? Can *they* feel the glorious throbs of excitement which even now are tearing her young heart to pieces? can they, too, ride, and spring, and bound, in all the mad enjoyment of childish spirits encouraged by the wild plaudits resounding from every side? No; and truly there is no prouder and happier mortal on earth to-night than this sunburnt, ragged child of sin!

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About the same hour, in the gloaming of the summer night, a slender, pale-faced child sits on the surf-beaten shore of a wild northern coast. Above her towers the façade of an old Norman keep, with one single light gleaming out afar from a high and narrow turret window ; below her lies nothing but the wild stormy sea. Weird and desolate beyond description is the scene, lonely and sad sounds the ceaseless roar of the foaming surf, but the girl looks out afar, to where the setting sun's last ray has left its gleam still upon the horizon, and she can scarce see the darkness which lies between, for the brightness which lies beyond. Who, save a child, can see the silvery lining to every cloud ?

The same night wind which moaned so sadly and drearily round the wild northern shore, swept soft and lovingly

through the branches of the great trees at Beechwarden, far away in the sunny south. The blue-eyed, flaxen-haired child and her companions were asleep, and dreaming of the evenings' bye-gone happiness ; the little circus-rider lay tossing restlessly to and fro on her humble pallet, dreaming dreams which no kindly fate would ever realise !

And the grand old beech-trees looked down on all, and murmured softly : “ It must be so ; it must be so ! ”

CHAPTER I.

GRAHAMSTOWN.

“ Few the days so dark and dreary
But are brightened by a gleam,
Seldom night so long and weary
But 'tis lightened with a dream;
So the fruit that never ripens
Blossomed once for me,
Far away in bonny Scotland,
Down by the sea.”

Commune Malum.

“ A QUEER boy, but a regular brick,” had been the verdict at Eton, and “ a thorough good fellow, only a bit dreamy,” was the verdict a few years later of the 30th Hussars, on their schoolfellow and brother officer Alan Dering.

And yet there is little of dreaminess

about that said individual at this moment, as he stands on the wide lawn, smooth and green as a huge strip of emerald velvet, which lies in front of the windows of Grahamstown House, straining and struggling with all his might at a refractory tent rope, upon which mainly depends the stability of the small tent itself, destined, later on, for an asylum to harassed but affectionate couples, at Mrs. Graham's garden party, which takes place this very afternoon.

"I think that's tight enough now," he observes, presently, turning to address his hostess's daughter, who is standing near, anxious to supervise all arrangements for the impending festivity.

"Yes, I'm sure it is," answers Mary Graham, looking up with her cherry-cheeked honest face, and broad, beaming smile.

The relatives of Mr. Graham, the well-known millionaire, were apt to declare that his daughter showed a sad lack of dignity and pride in her blunt, straightforward manner, and universal geniality of disposition. Little mattered it to good-hearted Mary whether she were entertaining the Dowager Duchess of Doldrum or little Miss Twitchetts, the village schoolmistress; her mode of performing her duties would in both cases be precisely similar, and though the former austere lady might find fault with her brusque manner and somewhat plebeian appearance, the latter would feel at home with Mary at once; and this fact had perhaps done a good deal to assist the reputation for pleasant sociability which the garden-parties at Grahamstown House invariably enjoyed.

“Mary, I can’t find another single

blessed chair for this last tent, so the distressed parties who are likely to occupy its peaceful shelter must sit on their thumbs ;” and a short, fair young man, with a merry, cheery face, saunters idly up to where the last finishing touches are being put to the striped red-and-white marquee in question.

“Oh, dear, dear, Teddy ; what shall we do ? I *must* find something to put in this tent, for its colours look so bright and nice in the sun ; I wouldn’t have it taken down for anything.”

Teddy Graham looks perplexed, and wrinkles his brows in a vain effort to try and think of some way in which to solve the difficulty.

“I know, Miss Graham !” interrupts Alan Dering. “There is that garden-bench which we discarded from the lawn-tennis ground yesterday, because it had

such a rickety leg; we'll get it back, and prop up the corner on bricks or something."

"Yes; and we'll cover it all over with mamma's big Algerian rug," exclaims Mary, delighted, "and then it will look all right, and will be as comfortable as"—

"Booby-trap as can possibly be made," concludes Teddy, finishing the sentence for her. "However, don't let me interfere with your humane intentions, Molly, and we'll get the bench down here at once."

"Shall we put a placard on the seat—
'With care'?" suggests Alan Dering, "as a label of 'Kicker' is put on a man's back out hunting, whose mount is erratic with its heels."

Alan always speaks quietly, and with a somewhat *insouciant* manner; so Mary

Graham fails to see that he is not in earnest, and ponders the question carefully with one finger on her lip.

“No, I think not,” she remarks, after due consideration; “we’ll trust to luck, and hope that whoever may come to sit in this tent will not be energetic in their movements or demeanour.”

“Very well, my dear,” laughs her brother. “I’ll remember that I must make no rash declarations or reckless love here, likely to test the frail constitution of that blessed seat. Nor will I shake it by the violence of my emotion when I shed a tear later on for the girl who left me behind her!”

“You’ll first have to find the girl who is *worth* weeping for, in this desolate ‘North Countrie,’ ” suggests sensible Mary.

“Is the race of pretty girls extinct in

these wild Border Lands?" asks Alan Dering, with a natural and becoming interest in the possible "beauties of the future."

"No, not a bit," answers Mary Graham, who is one of those women that can see some good in everybody, and some beauty in every face; "only Teddy is so particular in his views on that subject."

" 'Teddy' hasn't forgotten your last so-called 'beauty,' Miss Molly, whom Venus was popularly supposed 'not to be a patch upon,' but who turned out in reality to be as near a mulatto as an English climate could permit her to be."

"Oh, Teddy, you *know* that was only because her mother had been a Creole! And I'm sure you didn't look as if you were not admiring her either, for you

never spoke to any one else the whole evening at Lady Hopping's ball!" adds Mary, with sisterly dictatorialness.

"There is now going to arise a little unpleasantness," murmurs Alan Dering, sleepily; "suppose we change the subject. Your sister has fully verified her statement, my dear Teddy, that, whatever your taste in female beauty may be, the opinions which you express of the fair sex behind their backs are not carried out by your behaviour to them before their faces."

Teddy Graham laughs, and resumes his previous question with a plaintive enquiry as to whether there is *no* one coming with whom he can dance with satisfaction—for many of the expected guests are to stay for dinner, and finish up the evening by dancing.

"Well, of course you know all the

usual people likely to come," ponders Mary, "but I daresay there might be a few London people here that you know, Teddy, for just now, at the end of August, so many people are passing to and fro from Scotland."

"H'm," observes her brother in a doubtful tone.

"Oh, but we've one real curiosity coming, though! Somehow I had quite forgotten her until this moment. Just imagine, Teddy—old Lord Ercildoun's daughter is coming, Cecil Ruthven!"

"Whew!" whistles Teddy Graham, almost in awe.

"Yes, she is really and truly coming! We wrote to her, of course, out of sheer politeness, because mamma used to know Lady Ercildoun long ago, before the latter died; and we expected to receive as usual a curt reply from that terrible

old man, declining for his daughter and self. But instead, I received this note from the daughter yesterday, accepting our invitation ; and look, Teddy ! it's not so badly written, nor even badly spelt, is it ? ”

“ No, not at all,” coincides Teddy Graham, as the brother and sister both lean their heads together over the note in question, scanning the fair, legible handwriting with some curiosity.

“ What is the mystery about Lord Ercildoun's daughter ? ” inquires Alan Dering, who has been watching the speakers' faces and listening to their words with quiet interest. “ There is nothing very remarkable in a young lady being able to spell her own name correctly, Teddy.”

“ There is, though, in this case, my dear fellow. So far as any one knows,

the said young lady has had no education whatever."

"You know, Lord Ercildoun is considered a most wicked, weird old man," continues Mary Graham, explanatorily; "and no one would live in that haunted old castle of his if he asked them. So this poor girl has lived there from year to year utterly alone with him, and has had no teachers at all, they say, since the death of the old French chaplain who used to live with them at one time."

"Why do they say that Ercildoun Castle is haunted?"

"Oh, strange lights are seen in the window of an old ruined chapel which looks down on the sea, often and often. And in the great hall of the castle there hangs the picture of a certain lovely ancestress, whose lover sailed over the sea, and I believe came to an untimely

end, and so she died of a broken heart. Every living soul within thirty miles round Ercildoun will tell you that this lovely ancestress appears at the window of the ruined chapel which hangs over the sea, on certain nights of the year, wringing her hands and singing dirges over her lost lover."

"And the odd part of it is," adds Teddy Graham, "that those particularly 'keen and canny' fishermen which drive their trade round that part of the coast close to Ercildoun Head (as they call the high, rocky promontory upon which the castle stands), all swear and declare that the ghost of a vessel, quite a repetition of the 'Flying Dutchman' once more, can distinctly be seen on such nights, far out at sea, and that after a time it fades away into the mist again and disappears, and no one can say whence it comes or where it goes."

But Alan Dering seems to be no longer listening to his friend's discourse, for a grave speculating look crosses his face, which leaves its shadow there like a cloud, and his thoughts are obviously wandering far away into the realms of Fate, and not reality.

In a little while he lights a cigar, and saunters slowly away across the lawn, leaving the brother and sister engaged in a hot argument respecting the most desirable spot in which to locate the small band destined to pipe the tunes to which Mrs. Graham's guests will by-and-bye dance.

"Do you know, your friend Mr. Dering is rather odd, Teddy," observes his sister, when the knotty point under discussion has at last been settled to their mutual satisfaction.

"In what way odd?" demands Teddy

Graham, indignantly, ready instantaneously to take up the cudgels on behalf of his favourite brother officer and very best of what he calls "pals."

"Well, I mean he changes so. Sometimes he is so cheery, and quite amusing, and I'm sure he is clever; but just as I am laughing at something he says, such a sad, dreamy look crosses his face, that I feel half afraid of having done the wrong thing somehow."

"Oh, that's nothing! I know what you mean; but it's only because he gets strange ideas into his head sometimes, and I think it makes him dreamy. He inherits that sort of nature from his German mother, who fairly killed herself, I believe, with dread of ghosts and longing for the unattainable before she was twenty. So they say, at least."

"I wonder what sort of ideas he gets

into his head," speculates Mary Graham, whose prosaic mind cannot conceive any sane individual being troubled with flights of fancy.

"Well, I know that he is a fatalist, for one thing. He does not believe that any powerful influence in life, of whatever sort it may be, is anything save simply what he calls 'Fate.'"

"But he must be a heathen!" expostulates Mary.

"No, he isn't; at least, I don't *think* so," responds Teddy, feeling that on this subject he is perhaps scarcely capable of offering a sound opinion. "Any way, he's a thundering good sort—I know that," continues Mr. Dering's attached brother officer with warmth; "and, whether he's a sinner or a saint, he's the best fellow *I* know, and a thorough good officer, too, I can tell you."

“Oh, I’m quite willing to believe him everything you like,” laughs Mary. “I couldn’t have believed, though, that so clever a man as Mr. Dering would have faith in that sort of stuff,” she adds, contemptuously.

“I can’t say I agree with his views on that subject, any more than you do; but yet I know *one* thing—that if I had to pick from all the earth my beau ideal of a man of the world, a sportsman, and a gentleman, that man would be Alan Dering.” And Teddy Graham walks leisurely into the house, as if to put a stop to any further detracting comments which it might possibly be his sister’s intention to utter concerning the Fidus Achates of his honest heart.

CHAPTER II.

ALAN DERING.

“I stand on the brink of the river,
The river that runs to the sea.”

Over the Water.

THE words, “a man of the world, a sportsman, and a gentleman,” were no bad description of him who now stood leaning his arms on the small wicket gate leading out of the wood behind Grahamstown House, and lazily surveying the beautiful valley, bounded far away by a high range of purple, heather-covered mountains and fells which lay before him.

The tall, slight, sinewy figure vouches for strength and activity whensoever

either may be called upon; the easy, graceful manner gives an impression of belonging to one who has mixed much in society and with the world at large; and the good-looking, dark face looks most essentially "thoroughbred."

Any one glancing casually at Alan Dering's face, would simply receive the impression of its being a handsome and a kindly one; but those who scanned it closer, and discerned the strange mixture of feverish wakefulness and apathetic sleep which looked out from those dreamy, hazel-grey eyes, were often prone to think, "that man is one who will see ever before him glorious visions of name and fame, but who will never in this world have power, resolution, or energy enough to turn those bright fanciful visions into a proudly conscious reality."

And yet, sentimental as is his attitude,

and touchingly serious as is the expression of his face, Alan Dering's thoughts at this moment are simply intent on solving two very ordinary problems generally given to mankind each year by Fate, *i.e.*, whether the now waning grouse-shooting season had after all proved a game worth the candle, and, secondly, *how* many of the Leger favourites would successfully stand their last fortnight's preparation for that great race, should the hot August sun continue to bake the earth into the consistency of bath bricks, as it was doing at present.

As no amount of silent speculation or impatient tilting of his hat on to the back of his head served to clear up young Mr. Dering's doubts on these two most important subjects, he unlatched the wicket-gate at last, and walked slowly back towards the house, which could be

seen gleaming out from amongst the trees and bracken-covered ground, in a huge, imposingly ugly and utterly shapeless white mass of stucco and bad taste.

“I wonder who the devil ever invented garden parties by way of an amusement!” he muttered discontentedly, as stray blots of red and white dotted over the landscape recalled to his mind the marquees which had been arranged for the shelter of society at large later on. Like most men, festive gatherings of this description found small favour in his eyes; especially when, as to-day, they might reasonably be regarded as taking the place of a possible “grouse drive.”

“And there will certainly not be a soul here that I shall know,” he continued, with rather self-satisfied contempt; “and the women are expected to be ugly enough from all accounts, and I shan’t

be allowed to go and entrench myself in the smoking-room, for they're sure to be short of men—these sort of entertainments always are!" and Alan's spirits sank lower and lower, and his steps became slower, as he neared the fatal portals of the millionaire's mansion.

However, the great clatter of knives and forks and rattle of plates, which fell on his ear as he entered the hall, had a more exhilarating effect upon his nerves, and he felt so far recovered a few minutes after as to be capable of eating his luncheon with much apparent comfort and peace of mind. These were perhaps a little disturbed by the somewhat near vicinity of Mrs. Graham's little motherless twin granddaughters, who are permanent residents in the heart and home of that kind-hearted dame, and whose singular capacity for unconscious mischief

is only equalled by their imperturbability to all entreaties or persuasions.

Posy, otherwise Penelope, and Tosy, otherwise Theresa, are the names by which these two plump and flaxen-haired imps are known; and each is almost fatter than the other, and each one seems more blue-eyed and rosy-cheeked than its fellow mortal, until one wonders whether any human being could have the heart to chastise or correct such engaging little souls, whatever might be the mischief which Satan found for their fat little idle hands to do, until that mischief took the shape of personal aggression and aggravation to one's own self.

Having made them thoroughly to understand and digest the fact, that he *must* draw the line somewhere, and that he draws it at "jammy fingers," Alan Dering remained unmolested whilst the

twins partook of some Gateau à la Néapolitaine, well smeared with apricot preserve. But as soon as lunch was over, and their fat and fubsy little paws had been well polished in an adjacent finger-glass, they set upon him with one consent, and with much coaxing and dumb show prevailed upon the young man to let them accompany him to the billiard-room, where he intended indulging in a peaceful after-lunch smoke.

No sooner did they arrive in this coveted haven than a bewildering sense of decorum stole over both of the little fat maidens, and solemnly they seated themselves upon two footstools exactly opposite Alan's arm chair, and fixed their round blue eyes on him with a most harassing and pertinacious stare, denoting much awe and interest.

“What makes de 'moke so long comin’

out of oo's mouth?" observed Posy at last, with grave curiosity.

Before Alan can reply, Tosy settles the question by observing.

"'Cause de 'moke goes down 'is inside, of course!" with which explanation they both remain perfectly satisfied.

"Does 'ou love sweeties?" asks Tosy, after a pause.

"No, not very much; why?"

"Posy loves sweeties *verry* much," remarks Tosy suggestively.

Posy sighs deeply, and folds her little fat hands over her waist firmly, as if to carry out the rôle of suppressed longing which her sister assigns to her. ?

"You wicked little humbugging brats!" laughed Alan Dering at last, as he produced some chocolate sugar-plums from his pocket which he had hidden there at luncheon time, but not so cautiously as

to have escaped the two pair of blue eyes intent upon his movements.

“Mr. Dering,” and Mary Graham’s cheerful, bustling face appeared at the door, “this is the only room in the house which is not occupied by a whole lot of people, and would you *very* much mind if I left Mrs. Jinks’ baby (she’s our curate’s wife, you know, and this is her eleventh) in here for five minutes, whilst she gets some luncheon? It’s as good as gold, and will lie flat on the floor without giving any trouble. Now mind, Posy and Tosy, that you don’t tease it?”

“Us wouldn’t for de world!” assured the twins in a breath, with much solemnity; and Mary departed to cater for the comfort of the infant’s maternal parent, who apparently was quite contented to leave her offspring to its fate. But as this latter was said to be Mrs. Jinks’

eleventh achievement in that line, her callousness was perhaps not quite so much to be wondered at.

For a minute or two all went well, then the baby began to wriggle and to get very red in the face, obviously preparing to "boil up" a most stentorian roar.

"It's goin' to cwy!" remarks Tosy to Alan, solemnly.

"Good Lord! what *am* I to do with it?" exclaims that much perplexed young man, as the baby gives unerring proof of the truth of Tosy's statement.

"Suppose 'ou carwy it to de sofa?" suggests Posy.

So lamentably ignorant is Mr. Dering on the subject of infants that he grasps at even Posy's advice with a gleam of hope, and tries hard to collect the baby and lift it up from off the floor.

Hardly has he progressed two steps

with his burthen ere he feels the task to be one which it is utterly beyond his nerve to accomplish.

“Oh, Lord, its head is coming off! I *must* let it drop,” he wails piteously, and deposits the baby once more hurriedly on the ground, right in the middle of the room ; then, sitting down in his chair and resuming his cigar, he surveys it with disgusted astonishment.

“I ’ates babies, doesn’t ’oo?” remarks Tosy, sympathetically, reading the expression on his face with all a child’s quickness.

“Indeed I do!” groans her much enduring auditor.

But the infant had been so much startled by its sudden elevation, and equally sudden subsequent degradation, that it maintained a profound silence, and Alan Dering resumed his interrupted

cigar and disturbed meditations with some prospect of peaceful calm once more.

Before many minutes had passed, however, his reverie was suddenly disturbed by odd little "squirks" and other strange noises, and looking round he perceived Tosy and Posy intent on balancing the baby in a sitting position against the wall, near to which they had carefully dragged it.

"What are you about, you children?" exclaimed Alan indignantly. "What are you doing with that wretched baby?"

"We'se only teachin' it to 'sit up,' same as we teached the terrier puppy this mornin'," responded Posy calmly, letting go of the unfortunate baby as she spoke, and allowing it to roll summarily on to its face. Tosy righted it with a vehement shove, whereupon the long-suffering

infant once again got somewhat red in the face and prepared for a wail, the very prospect of which caused Alan's fingers to be clapt nervously to his sensitive ears.

At this juncture Mary Graham bustled in once more, and picking up the baby she quickly hushed it in her kind motherly arms; whilst darting a scrutinizing look at Posy and Tosy, she inquired—

“Have you children been teasing this baby?”

“Oh, no, *indeed* we hasn't!” asseverated those fat little mortals, with such a look of convincing innocence in their round blue eyes as caused Alan Dering fully to realise how singularly early in life the female mind becomes capable of deception.

It being, however, rather a case of “honour amongst thieves,” and as to tell of the baby's enforced acrobatic feat

might also entail the revelation of his own unsuccessful attempt at transporting that ill-starred eleventh hope of the house of Jinks, Mr. Dering was reduced to the silence which means consent ; and so Miss Graham departed in peace, followed in silent dignity by the plump little twins, whose back view, as they receded from sight, left nothing but a vision of two huge blue sashes and two mops of “crêpé” golden hair, which would not have disgraced the heads of the most mediæval saints on record.

CHAPTER III.

LORD ERCILDOWN'S DAUGHTER.

“Pink and white the blossoms fell,
Quivering down through the summer air,
On the shaven sward so trim and bare.

Oh, I remember well

The very network of the tree,
And its shadows dancing on her and me.

* * * * *

’Tis strange to think of now, and yet

’Twere stranger, harder, to forget.”

Lost.

Two hours later, as Alan Dering sauntered across the wide lawn, now crowded with chairs and tea-tables, bright dresses, and occasional clerical black coats, or still rarer light coloured ones, he discerned from afar the blue dress of Mary

Graham, who was apparently surrounded by a bevy of protectorless fair ones—a sight which awoke in his heart some sense of duty, though possibly little sympathy.

The tone of relief in which poor Mary at once introduced him to the two Misses Gobang, who were fast and flighty, and the two Misses Sandbag, who were heavy and cumbersome—showed that he guessed the situation aright; and so he put a good face on the matter, and fetched and carried, and procured tea for all, with an apparent alacrity which won him golden opinions in the mind of his harassed young hostess.

But the general conversation languished and proved a most uphill task, for as the Misses Gobang laughed superciliously at each inane and proper remark made by the Misses Sandbag, whilst

the latter in their turn shrugged their shoulders sneeringly at every word of slang (and these were many) which fell from the lips of their rivals, it became a work of real ingenuity to find any subject in common which should please all parties, and both Mr. Dering and Miss Graham glanced at each other in comic despair.

Suddenly a new arrival appeared on the scene, and amidst a dead silence, full of mingled surprise and curiosity, all eyes were turned on a tall, slight figure, dressed in white, which emerged from the shaded trellis-work alley close behind the group.

Though opinions might have differed as to what claims on actual beauty were possessed by the new comer, no one could have denied that her appearance was beyond measure striking. Rather above

the usual height of women, and with a head carried singularly erect, there was an air rather of proud defiance, not only in her attitude, but also in the fearless dark grey eyes which calmly surveyed the party before her, resting with tranquil scrutiny on each face in turn. There was singular resolution and power in every feature of the pale, quiet, and somewhat sad face, and a look of stern capability, more befitting a man's expression, perhaps, than a woman's, gave the only index to their possessor having already reached the age of three-and-twenty, for in all else she looked nothing more than an overgrown child.

But her mouth was the new arrival's most striking characteristic. Finely cut lips, which each instant could scarce restrain a sensitive quiver, and a strange ever-varying expression, sometimes bright

and gay like a merry child's, sometimes sad and sweet like a weary woman's, the capacity of feeling pain and yet bravely enduring it, made itself realised in some undefinable way whilst looking at that beautiful mouth. In all other respects her attributes were pleasant enough, though there was nothing out of the common in either the dark hair, arranged neatly and close to the head, or in the grey eyes, with their royally fearless glance. And yet this same fearlessness was not that of frankness and confidence, but rather the fearlessness of some wild animal which knows no fear simply because it knows no human beings, and reckes not of the pain and sorrow which a knowledge of *their* world and its ways must bring into its own.

No ardent disciples of the "fleshy school," no sensual worshippers of mere

outward beauty of form and face, no votary of rank and fashion, as portrayed by frizzled *toupets* or "school of art" vesture, would ever have allowed their eyes to rest more than an instant on a face so utterly free from all these advantages as was this one so pure, refined, and proud; but an artist or a dreamer would have glanced at it again and again, and each time that he did so would have discovered fresh attraction in the strange strength of mingled sadness and sweetness to be found there.

Her dress, too, was quaint and unlike that of others. Simple white, and plain to a fault; yet the lace scarf wound across her shoulders was of extraordinary rarity and fineness; whilst in each of her little shell-like ears, and glancing out like small sparks of fire from under the shade of a large, old-fashioned black

velvet hat, shone two single diamonds, which alone would in olden days have been worth a king's ransom.

"I am Cecil Ruthven," said the new arrival, in a low, clear voice, and after a moment's hesitation, holding out, as she spoke, a small but gloveless hand to Mary Graham, who had courteously advanced to welcome this fresh acquisition to their party. And straightway kindly Mary smiled on her with cordial satisfaction, and introduced her to the other four young ladies, who were now standing a little apart, engaged in discussing Miss Ruthven's quaint style of dress, with a vicious zest which proved that here at least was a neutral ground on which the opinions of all the fair antagonists could safely meet.

Miss Ruthven made a deep and old-fashioned curtsey to the company at

large, in acknowledgment of her introduction, and a perceptible smile of sarcasm crossed the countenances of the four fashionable young ladies confronting her; but it died away abashed before the stranger's steady scrutiny, as her eyes travelled from face to face and rested quietly on each for the space of a few seconds, with the look of one who expects to meet naught but foes, yet still seeks for the face of a friend.

Perhaps there was a shade more kindness in Alan Dering's eyes than in any others, for those of Miss Ruthven rested on them with slightly more confidence than could be read in her own as she met the hard bright orbs of the Misses Gobang, and the dull leaden ones of the Misses Sandbag, relentlessly fixed upon her.

“Won't you have a cup of tea?”

inquired Mary Graham of her new guest ; and straightway she despatched Mr. Dering in quest of that luxury.

On his return he found Cecil Ruthven delivered over to the tender mercies of the four fair sisters, for Miss Graham's manifold duties as hostess had soon called her away, and numerous were the questions and cross-questions with which they plied her, each after their kind.

"Do you like garden-parties?" asked Miss Gobang the elder, "or do you think them awfully slow?"

"I hardly know," hesitated Cecil; "I never was at one before."

"Oh!" in an accent of frigid amazement.

"I dare say you'll like it much better when the hop—I mean the dance—begins later on," suggested Miss Gobang the younger, more kindly.

“I can’t dance,” was the reply, in a brusque tone, which told plainly of the *mauvaise honte* felt by the speaker in making such an acknowledgment.

“Oh!” was again the only comment made in return.

The Misses Sandbag stared at her stupidly, and made no attempt as yet towards starting any subject of conversation whatsoever.

“Have you had a long drive?” pursued Miss Gobang categorically.

“About eleven miles.”

“Oh! I call that immensely long. Had you a fast gee—a fast horse, I mean?”

“Yes, he goes fast.”

“Do you drive yourself?”

“Yes.”

By this time Alan Dering arrived with Miss Ruthven’s cup of tea, and sundry

expressive glances and secret shrugs of the shoulders from her fair examiners gave him to understand that the duty of entertaining her was likely to be an arduous undertaking.

But, little as he felt inclined to struggle through a dreary attempt at amusing a young lady whom it was apparently impossible to amuse, Mr. Dering felt still less inclination for the wearisome chatter and stolid inanity of his late fair companions; so, when Miss Ruthven had drunk her tea and consumed her square inch of bread and butter, he politely proposed to show her the conservatories, and they were soon slowly wending their way towards the less crowded part of the grounds.

“Do you care much about flowers?” inquired Alan, as they neared the first of those great glass palaces.

“I think so,” answered his companion, shyly; then added, with a little hesitation, “you know we have no conservatories at Ercildoun, and so I have never seen any but common flowers.”

“Well, these are scarcely common, I suppose,” laughed Alan, as he flung wide open the door of a large conservatory and ushered in Miss Ruthven.

In truth, the sight presented to her now was very far from common. The high walls at the back were one mass of foliage and moss—crimson and grey bignonias, feathery “maiden-hair” ferns, and shining deep emerald green “harts’-tongues”—all vied with each other how best to please the eye with their glory and colour. And on an artificial bank below the wall grew every sort and kind of moss, surrounding a marble basin, on which floated cold, quiet water lilies in serene content.

In the middle of the conservatory was a glorious array of tropical plants, and under the shadow of two large palm trees was planted a perfect mass of small orange trees, the heavy, intoxicating odour of which crept over the soul like a honied sleep.

“This is my favourite seat; one can never tire of this place,” remarked Alan Dering, after a pause, and pointing to a low, well-cushioned bench close to the orange trees.

Like all men of sensitive nerves and temperament, he was more keenly susceptible to the influence of their languid, drowsy sweetness than he himself knew, and for the moment he almost regretted having brought a stranger to disturb his solitary appreciation of the scene.

But he regretted it no longer when, on glancing towards Miss Ruthven, he saw

the rapt delight and childish enthusiasm which was legibly written on her face.

“Oh, how lovely! I never dreamed of things like these!” she exclaimed in a tone almost approaching to awe; and as her pale face lit up, and her eyes shone with a new bright glow of dreamy pleasure, Mr. Dering caught himself wondering how he could have set her down at first as “nothing out of the common,” which had indeed been the result of his first inspection of Miss Ruthven following their introduction. And so he was nothing loth to persuade his companion into sharing with him the comfortably cushioned seat already mentioned, and, whilst he smoked a cigarette, to endeavour to extract what ideas nature might have bestowed on this most unsophisticated maiden of the “North Country.”

CHAPTER IV.

EUPHARIS LILIES.

“ Since then,
 He had made it a law, in his commerce with men,
 That intensity in him, which only left sore
 The heart it disturb'd, to repel and ignore.

* * * *

Yet, indeed, deep within him, the spirits of truth,
 Vast, vague aspirations, the powers of his youth,
 Lived and breathed, and made moan—stirr'd themselves—
 strove to start
 Into deeds—though deposed, in that Hades, his heart.”

Lucile.

“ I NEED not ask now whether you like flowers, Miss Ruthven, for your face alone tells me that,” observed Alan, after a pause, during which he had studied the fair face beside him with more attention than the occasion appeared to warrant.

Cecil Ruthven started, but instead of the becoming blush which orthodox young ladies are supposed to cultivate when suddenly finding themselves the cynosure of masculine eyes, she only looked at him calmly with her clear, candid eyes, and answered leisurely—

“I suppose it *is* the flowers which I admire so much, but it almost seems to me as if their scent had even a stronger influence over one than their beauty. It creeps over me so strangely that I feel quite dreamy and stupid.”

“That’s just what I like, but I thought no one confessed to that weakness save myself;” and Mr. Dering turned and looked curiously at his companion’s face, as if striving to read there her innermost thoughts.

These baffled him, apparently, for ere long he began to discuss the past events

of the afternoon and the forthcoming ones of the evening, over which they both exchanged mutual confidences, and became most excellent friends.

“Mr. Dering,” and Cecil’s face looked ruefully earnest, “is it quite hopeless for me ever to learn to dance, now that I am so old?” Evidently the contempt of the Misses Gobang and Sandbag had somewhat rankled in Miss Ruthven’s mind.

“Of course not! Why, I should think many people never learn before they are twenty, perhaps,” replied Alan reassuringly.

“But I am three and twenty,” said Cecil in a disconsolate tone.

“Are you really so much as that?”

“Yes. Why do you look surprised?”

“I scarcely know; but somehow you look so much younger that I can scarcely believe you are the same age as myself!”

Truly, it did seem strange that each of them should have lived the same number of years in the world which had set its seal so forcibly on the face of the man but had left the woman's scathless.

Mr. Dering caught himself vaguely wondering where and how the difference between himself and his companion lay; but one glance at her eager face and bright, speaking eyes, brought home to him the wide gulf which lay between this unsophisticated and unsatiated young soul, so keenly anxious to take its part in the strife and turmoil of life's battle-field, and his own already half-wearied, wholly disillusionised heart and mind.

On Alan Dering, with his sensitive, reserved nature, and singular intensity of character, the many minor disappointments of life, the endless Dead Sea apples, which Fate deals to those who in their

hot-headed youth beg and pray for life's experience, had not been without sore effect. True, the common sense, of which nature had given him no small share, allied as it was to youth, strong health, and a great love for active outdoor occupations, had come to the rescue and saved him from that morbid feeling of utter distrust in men, women, life, and all things, so common to weaker minds; and though he possessed a good deal of the dreaminess and idealism which is the usual accompaniment to refined and unconsciously artistic natures, still his habits and pursuits, his whole line in life, had simply made him what his friends so justly described: "a man of the world, a sportsman, and a gentleman." In heart, temper, and passions, he was listless and difficult to arouse; a man, who, though realising to the full the

pleasures of life, could never be really touched save through the purest and most chivalrous side of his nature; but capable, when once the "open sesame" should have rung out its command over his soul, of the most reckless loyalty and devotion which human heart ever gave to its ideal; a man with all a man's weakness, redeemed by unswerving strength and faith when once his hour should have come.

He was quite willing to believe that there *were* roses in the world worth gathering, but for his part he could not see them; perhaps they were hidden from him, perhaps they were after all only "blue roses;" certain it was that they were not worth the pain and trouble of a search. Yet, whilst drifting aimlessly down life's current, and laughing with easy, careless cynicism at the world

and its ways, there were times when Alan Dering felt scarcely content with his own share in the wild tangled dream which we mortals call "Life." Moments there were when a yearning for something to believe in, some power strong enough to rouse him from his natural dreamy indolence into clear and active purpose, took possession of his soul, to the great disturbance of the latter's peace for the time being; and then a feverish unrest, and an unsatisfied craving for some deeper and truer aim and purpose in life, seemed to pervade his whole being. But these phases of feeling were seldom of any long duration, and the old dreamy listlessness of heart and mind seemed to creep over him ere long once more, for the one great "open sesame" remained as yet unsounded.

"But can you really not dance at all?" inquired Mr. Dering, after a while.

“Not the least bit,” answered his companion, truthfully.

“Then I shall ask you to sit out one or two dances with me this evening, if you will, Miss Ruthven?” observed Alan, feeling that it was a feat quite beyond his energy to teach an ignorant young woman her first steps in dancing.

Cecil looked a shade disappointed, as though she had expected him to volunteer greater assistance towards solving the momentous problem than this quiescent submission to fate seemed to promise.

“I suppose it is just because I can’t do it, that I think so much of being able to dance,” she said with a wistful smile.

“No fear but what you will know how to dance some day, Miss Ruthven;” and Alan Dering almost regretted to think what a change a few more years would

probably make in his present frank, unsophisticated companion.

The conversation drifted gradually off to the subject of Miss Ruthven's own self, her pursuits, occupations, and interests; and stranger grew the revelations of life and character which each moment she unconsciously laid before her listener's wondering gaze.

Her naturally proud and reserved nature made it a considerable effort to her to speak frankly and openly to a stranger; yet her singular ignorance of the world and fearlessness of all criticism, gave her a great longing to accept the quiet, unobtrusive interest and sympathy given to each recital of hers now.

"I have heard of your father," said Mr. Dering once, when Cecil paused for a moment in her vivid description of Ercildoun and its grand weird beauty;

“I think that he and an uncle of mine, whose name is Dumaresque, were once great friends in the days of their youth.” He did not add that probably Lord Ercildoun’s well-known eccentricities of temper and disposition had succeeded in estranging him from one and all of those who might once have called him friend.

“Do you think so really? It may be so,” answered Miss Ruthven thoughtfully; “but I never hear him mention any one, friend or foe.”

“And you live always alone?”

“Always, ever since Father Dubois died. He was our chaplain and my tutor, and he taught me Latin and French and everything.”

“Do you care for reading?” asked Alan, inwardly wondering how soon he should cut his own throat were he too

condemned to such a life of solitary confinement.

“More than all else in the world!” and Cecil’s face lit up like that of a mother who speaks of her favourite child.

“And what sort of books do you read?” inquired her companion curiously.

“Well, ‘Shakespeare,’ ‘Hannah More,’ ‘Travels,’ in every part of the world, endless ‘Legends,’ both Danish and Norse, and—oh! and then I often read such a pretty French book called ‘Les Amours d’Adolphe.’”

“Good heavens; that sounds rather a mixture!” exclaimed Alan aghast. “I shouldn’t have let you read that last book if *I* had anything to say to it,” he adds severely.

“Why not? It’s such a pretty story, you can’t think how pretty.”

“What’s it about?” asked Mr. Dering,

suspicious and unconvinced. "Is 'Adolphe' a good young man on the whole?"

"Well, I hardly know," said Cecil slowly and thoughtfully. "I *should* have described him as very, very good indeed, for he has such charming sentiments always, especially about '*sa mère*,' but I think it's odd the way he makes love to so many ladies at once, or is that right in France?" and Miss Ruthven's clear eyes look calmly at her companion's face for instruction.

"I suppose they do it there," assented Alan gravely. "And in other countries as well," added his conscience inwardly. "But doesn't it make the situation rather a complicated one for '*le cher Adolphe*'?"

"No, oh! no," said Cecil reassuringly, "for he never marries *one* of them in the

end, and so of course there's no harm done to any one."

"Of course," assented Mr. Dering again, gravely. "And so this 'ladies' man' *M. Adolphe*, is your beau ideal of what a man should be, I suppose?" he continued after a pause, during which his thoughts had been engaged in philosophical reflections on the advantages and disadvantages of a thoroughly unsophisticated mind.

"Oh no! *very* much no!" Cecil's face changed instantly from gay to grave, and an expression of sternness and almost of contempt crept over it.

"Really not?" and Alan Dering watched this same change with a half amused, half interested look.

"Most truly not! I should like men's characters to be so strong and true, that we women should recognise their strength

and lean on them in perfect trust; I should like them to wear their lives out, not rust them out, to live and act, not only to think and dream. In a word, I would have men to *be* men, and then we should be *women*, true and good perhaps!"

In deep astonishment Mr. Dering gazed at the eager face and darkening eyes of the speaker, whose voice shook slightly at the conclusion of her sentence. Evidently this was a subject of importance out of the common in the thread of her young life, but he was too courteous to press for further information out of mere idle curiosity, so he only remarked quietly—

"I'm going to be really good and to do my duty now, Miss Ruthven, in the way of carrying you off from this garden of Eden. You know, or perhaps you *don't* know, that we are all to dine soon after seven to day, with a view to the dance

later on. Such are our hostess' orders, and so we must, I fear, go and dress."

"Dress!" exclaimed Cecil in dismay, "why, I brought no other dress with me, only a pair of shoes and stockings. I did not know anything about it, you see," she added in a humble and yet vexed tone.

"Then let me reassure you with the information that hardly any of the other ladies will change their dresses either. It is only we men who are to be allowed the luxury of *bonâ fide* evening clothes. And for this arrangement Mrs. Graham's masculine visitors may chiefly thank me, for I believe that it was my rooted and openly expressed objection to dancing in any other garments which turned the scale."

"*Can't* a man dance in anything but evening dress?" asked Cecil, doubtfully. "Are the others too heavy, or tight, or

what? You see, I don't know how to dance myself, so it's hard to understand it all."

"Well, no, it's not exactly that, perhaps, but you see one *looks* such a fool."

"Oh, yes," said Cecil, with much interest. (The ways of the world were a fruitful source of curiosity to her unenlightened mind.) "I see; it's not that you really *can't*, but because it doesn't look so nice?"

"Just so," assented Mr. Dering, with as seriously thoughtful an expression on his face as if it were a homily on the tactics of the Government, of which he was delivering himself. "Of course a man could ride to hounds in a frock coat if he tried, I suppose, but a pretty fool he'd look."

"Of course," replied Cecil, ignorant but acquiescent.

“I’ll tell you something you might wear, though,” exclaimed Mr. Dering, as they rose to depart; “some of these lovely Eupharis lilies,” and he pointed to a cluster of those beautiful flowers as he spoke.

“May I have one or two, do you think?” asked Cecil, joyfully. Already the spirit of coquetry and of feminine vanity, which had so long lain dormant, was waking up in her woman’s heart.

“Yes, I am sure you may. Mrs. Graham is kindness itself about everything. There—now with a little maiden-hair fern mixed with it, though I’ll confess that I don’t know *how*, this will make as pretty a bouquet for the hair as any one can desire.”

“Indeed it will; thank you so much;” and Miss Ruthven took it from him with frank and sincere gratitude.

They were Alan's favourite flowers, and he had always nourished a sort of silent and half-unconscious "sentiment" for them, all of which he had forgotten for the moment. But now it suddenly recurred to him; and it was with a feeling of slight chagrin that he pursued his way towards the house, seeing his pet flowers in the careless and unrecognising hand of a stranger.

CHAPTER V.

MON RÊVE.

“Then she answered: ‘We are our own fates. Our own
deeds
Are our doomsmen. Man’s life was made not for men’s
creeds,
But men’s actions.’”

Lucile.

“This leads us, the other pushes us.”

MONTAIGNE.

THE gorgeous and over-gilded drawing-room at Grahamstown House looked one blaze of glitter and of gold in the flare of waxlights innumerable, as Alan Dering sauntered up to the doorway and looked in, after the dancing had commenced about an hour.

He had beguiled the first part of that

hour, if the truth must be told, by smoking one or more cigarettes in his former refuge, the billiard-room ; after which he had been captured by Mary Graham and told off to three duty dances running, during each of which his temper became inwardly worse and worse ; and it was with a decidedly morose, if not positively sulky, expression of countenance that he now stood in the doorway contemplating the scene of the festivities.

He looked about for his afternoon's companion, but nowhere was Miss Ruthven to be seen ; and he was far too indolent by nature to take the slightest trouble in finding anything or anybody, even were it conducive to his own comfort or amusement.

Close beside him stood a bevy of stout chaperons, male and female, who were actively engaged in admiring the airs and

graces of their own offspring during each mazy dance, and criticising pityingly the less favoured progeny of their neighbours.

“I’m glad now that I let Pamela wear a fashionable fringe on her forehead, it looks so nice and simple,” murmured Pamela’s proud mother to a sympathetic maiden aunt. “But it cost many lessons from Truefitt,” she added regretfully, having evidently paid dearly for the “simplicity” of her *ingénue*.

“Yes; very different to that tall girl in black dancing opposite to her, whose hair is done as tight and plain as if she were just going to wash her face.”

“Some countrified hoyden, who knows nothing of the fashions, I suppose,” suggested the mother of Pamela, pityingly, whose ormolu mansion at Bayswater gave her a right, she opined, to be a judge on these subjects. “Can you

tell me, *who* is the young lady in black, dancing *vis-à-vis* to my daughter?" she asked of her host, who came hurrying past at this moment.

Mr. Graham was a kindly, jovial little soul; a clever and conscientious man of business, and withal far too much of a gentleman to be in the least above acknowledging the source from whence he derived his wealth, or to lower and raise his standard of courtesy to others according to their weight in this world's great social scale. So he now turned his attention at once to the fair Pamela's mother (whose husband was head manager in the great house of Graham and Co.), and after much polishing of spectacles, in which process he included his face for luck, he at last succeeded in focussing the black-robed unknown.

"That? Oh! that is Lady Margaret

Osmonde, one of the bridesmaids at the recent royal wedding, you know;" and Mr. Graham passed on his way, leaving surprise, not to say consternation, behind him.

"How dowdy Laura Green looks to-night," murmured another ample matron, to the lord of her bosom. "So different from Julia! Who would think now, that they were own cousins?"

"Quite so, my dear," assented her obedient spouse; then, asserting his manly right to some sort of an opinion, he added, "but doesn't Julia stick out too much behind, my dear? I've no doubt it's all right, and of course it's the fashion, and you know best, my love; but—she *does* stick out in such a queer way!"

"Nonsense, my dear, nonsense. I'm sure Julia's dress is extremely pretty;

and I can assure you that it's the fashion to 'stick out' as you call it, behind, and not in front;" and the excellent lady gave a nervous glance at her own figure as she spoke, to judge whether that was also equal to the serious task imposed by fashion.

At this juncture a voice fell on Alan's ear, saying—

"Oh, I'll try to find Mr. Dering, mamma. He's so good-natured, I'm sure he will dance with Miss Podge."

"The gods forbid!" murmured Alan to himself, as he executed a *sauve qui peut* through the mass of chaperons behind him. "A worm *will* turn,"—he added, as the inviting name of Podge recurred to his memory.

Once in the long cool corridor outside the drawing-room he felt pretty safe, and stopped to consider whither next he

should bend his steps. At that instant the band recommenced playing in the ball-room, and the glorious dreamy notes of "Mon Rêve" stole softly and gently out into the hall. It was Alan's favourite valse, and he turned into the semi-darkened library which adjoined the ball-room, with the intention of enjoying its strains in peace and quietness.

A crimson sofa had been pulled across the doorway leading into the ball-room, to prevent that exit being used instead of the other door leading into the hall, and on the sofa sat Cecil Ruthven.

Just as Mr. Dering advanced across the room, the girl leant forward for an instant, so that the light from the ball-room beyond fell full on her head. The white Eucharis lilies in her hair were no purer than that pale, proud face, with its sweet, half-sorrowful expression; and the

clear, grey eyes looked wistfully tender as they gazed with longing at the giddy crowd of dancers beyond. Such a look of *sehnsucht* as poor Mignon's might have borne, when thinking of the Elysium she was never more to see.

Quietly Alan watched her, struck with a strong feeling of half surprise, and half admiration. Though he had almost forgotten his companion of the afternoon, *this* face could surely not be hers—that pleasant, unsophisticated child's! *This* was the face of a woman who could feel and think, who could strive and suffer; a noble and a true face, but a face stamped with the sadness only kin to natures which are born to suffer here, if not hereafter.

She leaned her cheek on her hand, and earnestly watched the scene before her, but with non-seeing eyes; for the sweet

tones of the valse sounded in her ears like some far-off song from another sphere; and weird legends of the old Norse land were wafted before her mind with each rise and fall of its soft, sad notes.

“Mon rêve,” murmured Alan to himself, and started as the idea suddenly occurred to him: what if this girl with the Eucharis lilies in her hair were fated to become the ideal and the dream of his life? Bah! he laughed to scorn a fancy so absurd; and with one more earnest glance at the proud, fearless face, with its clear, far-away eyes—a picture he was destined never hereafter utterly to forget—he advanced to the sofa, and took his place quietly beside her.

“How well you have hidden yourself all the evening, Miss Ruthven; even your best friends would have failed to find you.”

“I have no claim on any friends, small or great,” answered Cecil Ruthven, with a touch of regret in her frank voice; “and you know I cannot dance, so should only be in the way in there,” and she nodded her head towards the ball-room as she spoke.

“But wouldn’t you come and sit there and talk to the other people? Aren’t you bored here?” asked Mr. Dering, with well-meant kindness.

“Bored? Do you mean *ennuyé*, dull? Oh, no! How could I be, with such a lovely sight to look at? And then the music!” And Miss Ruthven pressed her hands together tightly, as if to pinch herself and make sure that she were not really in the fairyland where her thoughts had erstwhile flown to.

“That is my favourite valse,” said her companion, feeling a sudden and unac-

countable desire for her sympathy, even on this trivial topic.

“Is it? What is it called?”

“Mon Rêve.”

“I shall not forget.” And Alan felt quite content with the rapt admiration betrayed in that laconic response.

A feeling of very decided regret came over his mind as he remembered how unlikely it was that he would ever again meet his companion of the hour, and it was with almost a smile at his own folly that he asked her—

“Don’t you ever leave home, Miss Ruthven? Never go to London, or anywhere?”

“No, never.”

“But isn’t it woefully dull, living in this wild uninhabited country? I should cut my throat if I were left here even half a winter.”

“Oh no, you wouldn’t,” laughed the girl. “There’s plenty to do, I can tell you, and no time to think of suicide. Why, Ercildoun is one of the most dangerous headlands on the northern coast! And many a time I’ve been woke up at night by the sound of those terrible minute guns at sea, and then there’s hurrying to and fro, and we dress ourselves in hot haste—Janet (that’s my old nurse) and I—and we rush down to the rocks below the castle, where the rockets are blazing up. And sometimes,” here Cecil’s voice grew hushed and low, “it is very, very terrible, for the wreck of a ship comes drifting in, and one can, perhaps, see some of those on board still clinging to her; and one can almost hear their wails of despair as rocket after rocket is sent over towards them with the rope, only too often

just to light up the scene of their agony for one instant, and then to fall into the sea and extinguish—leave black darkness over all.”

Cecil Ruthven’s face looked pale and set as she spoke of these things, and Alan asked quickly—

“Why do they let you see such scenes, so young as you are?”

“Why am I there, you ask?” and the girl’s voice rings out in clear and almost reproachful tones. “To *help*—why else should I go?”

“But how—to help?”

“Because when the tide sets in to shore, it sometimes washes some poor soul on the rocks, and once or twice there has been some spark of life left even then. And Janet and I can at least send the men back to their work of rescue, and sit beside the poor half

drowned soul in the rough hut built on the sea shore, and do what little we can to bring them back to life and save it."

"Still I maintain that it's not a fit thing for a child like you to meddle in such scenes as those," exclaimed Alan, with unusual energy.

"Don't say that," answered Cecil, eagerly. "It is the one only little bit of good in the whole world that I can ever do—there is *nothing* else," and a wistful, half-despairing tone crept into her voice as she spoke.

Alan remained silent. After all, what right had he to find fault with her? Their ages were the same, and it struck him oddly that though an occasional act of kindness or generosity to some friend in trouble had been the sum total of *his* "help" to others in the weary battle of Life, yet that *she* had done much more

than this in giving hours of pain and weary watching, fighting to the last, with womanly tenderness and with almost manly courage, the fell destroyer's power.

But still, he had all a true Englishman's dislike to women mingling in scenes such as these, and so he answered shortly—

“Well, I can't help thinking that Janet, as you call her, might do all this without your help, Miss Ruthven. Such experiences as these must surely harden a woman's heart, and deaden much sensitive feeling.”

There was no answer, but a world of reproach looked up at him from two tear-laden grey eyes, and the quivering mouth looked sad and tender enough, as the girl turned and faced him with an anxious, wondering gaze.

“I beg your pardon ; I should not have

said that," said Alan quickly. "Of course *nothing* can hurt a true woman, and I honour you for doing your best in so good a cause," he added, in contrite apology to her obviously wounded feelings, more than from any change of opinion on his own part. "Will you forgive my hasty condemnation?"

"Of course!" and a little white hand was offered him frankly, as its owner rose to depart. "I must be going now, Mr. Dering, will you be so very kind as to help me find my carriage?"

"Yes, of course I will, if you really wish to go so soon, Miss Ruthven." And they both rose and went out into the great hall, where stray couples of dancers were parading up and down trying to cool themselves after their exertions.

"I'm afraid you will have to dive into that Pandemonium of glare and heat to

say good-bye to your hostess, Miss Ruthven," said Alan, nodding his head towards the ball-room as he spoke.

A look of dismay crossed Cecil's face at sight of the crowd, but she evidently realized the just rights of courtesy, and quietly dropping her companion's arm as they arrived at the doorway, she advanced straight to where Mrs. Graham sat in state, surrounded by the more honourable guests of the hour.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Graham;" and Alan Dering could detect no *mauvaise honte* in the clear decisive tones as they fell on his ear; "I thank you for the great pleasure you have given me in showing me my first ball."

"Not at all, my dear, not at all!" exclaimed Mrs. Graham, with good-natured fussiness. "And you mustn't call this a ball you know, for it's only

just a little dance. Your father must let you come again to see us, if he will?" she added kindly, as she remembered the desolate life led by her young guest.

"Oh, indeed, I *should* so like it!" and no truer flattery was ever offered a hostess than lay in the girl's honest joyful tones as she spoke.

"That's a bargain then, my dear," said Mrs. Graham, shaking hands with Miss Ruthven heartily, and as she turned and went her way, little did both surmise under what changes of time and circumstances they should meet again in after years.

"Now, will you wait in the hall whilst I go and find your servant, Miss Ruthven?" suggested Alan Dering, as she once more rejoined him.

"Oh, the dogcart will be quite ready,"

assured Cecil. "It is nearly ten o'clock, and I sent Davie a message to bring it round at half-past nine. Yes, there it is, standing under that big tree," she added, peering out into the moonlight from where she stood in the great house porch, putting on her hat.

Even as she spoke, the vehicle mentioned moved out into the moonlight and drew up before the hall-door. A strange old-fashioned conveyance it was, with an equally strange old servant driving it, whose shrivelled, wizened face gave one the impression of a resurrectionised mummy.

Mummy-like, also, he never uttered a word, but crept down from his place in the front and up to his place at the back of the dogcart, like a noiseless old ape, and with apparently just as little manners.

The gaunt, grey horse which had the honour of drawing Miss Ruthven's carriage, was as strange looking as everything else; he had the look of an animal which might be used to many odd journeys and queer occupations, and his startled look, and the nervous cock of his long and restless ears, betokened much uneasiness at the sights and sounds of civilized life to which he was evidently little accustomed.

The violent plunge also which he made into his collar, when finally started, and the pace at which he rattled the crazy old vehicle down the avenue leading from Grahamstown House, left no doubt in Mr. Dering's mind that the old grey horse was quite aware of his own and his cargo's unsuitability for scenes of lightness and festivity; and as the last stroke of his fast-trotting hoofs resounded far

away on the high road, Alan Dering turned to re-enter the house with the inwardly spoken comment in his heart, "so ends *mon rêve* ! "

CHAPTER VI.

ICHABOD.

“Down drops the red sun ; through the gloaming
They burst—raging waves of the sea
Foaming out their own shame—ever foaming
Their leprosy up with fierce glee ;
Flung back from the stone, snowy fountains
Of feathery flakes, scarcely flag
Where shock after shock, the green mountains
Explode on the iron-grey crag.

“The salt spray with ceaseless commotion
Leaps round me. I sit on the verge
Of the cliff—’twixt the earth and the ocean—
With feet overhanging the surge ;
In thy grandeur, oh sea ! we acknowledge,
In thy fairness, oh earth ! we confess,
Hidden truths that are taught in no college,
Hidden songs that no parchments express.”

Ashtaroath.

BUT Mr. Dering erred in this idea, as he found out a very few mornings later. When he descended into the dining-

room for breakfast, and glanced in passing at the numerous collection of letters lying on the sideboard there, his own name written in a strange handwriting caught his eye. Taking the letter up, he studied its address with some curiosity and with a faint remembrance of having seen somewhere before the odd, unconventional caligraphy visible thereon. Finally he opened it, and read as follows:—

“ Ercildoun Castle, August 30th.

“ DEAR MR. DERING,

“ My father desires me to say that he well remembers your uncle, Mr. Dumaresque, and, for his sake, will be most glad to give you a cordial welcome to Ercildoun, if you have leisure to come there for a few days at any time ?

“ Yours truly,

“ CECIL RUTHVEN.

“ P.S.—I’m afraid you will find Ercil-

doun very different to Mr. Graham's beautiful house ; but, please, will you try not to mind much, for I never knew father to ask any one here before."

The first half of the letter had evidently been written from dictation, but the latter half was plainly Cecil's own ; and with a vague wonder as to whether there were any fishing to be got at Ercildoun, if he went there for a few days just to kill time until he should go south for Doncaster, Alan Dering rushed upon his fate by writing an acceptance to Lord Ercildoun's invitation, and naming that day week for the time of his arrival, if convenient to all.

One day being much the same as another at Ercildoun, and to those who were its inmates, it were needless to say that the one selected by Mr. Dering

proved also to be the one on which the strange dog-cart, and still stranger old man and grey horse, came over betimes to convey him back there.

Many times during the course of the journey did Alan try to gain indirect pieces of information concerning his future host, or the latter's place of residence, but all in vain. The "mummy" either could not or would not speak save in monosyllables, and his short "I dinna ken," or "I canna tell," effectually extinguished Mr. Dering's attempts at affable converse.

So, what between the taciturnity of Lord Ercildoun's henchman and the scant information which his friends, the Grahams, had been able to offer him anent that eccentric peer and his wild domain, Alan found himself more in the dark respecting his prospects for the next few

days than had ever been the case in his life before.

It was past six o'clock when they drew near to Ercildoun Castle ; for nothing would make Mrs. Graham consent to her guest's departure before afternoon tea. " You may be glad of it, for who knows whether you will get any dinner ? " she said, lugubriously.

" Not so bad as that, I hope," Alan had laughingly answered ; but now he began somehow to feel less certain of this fact ; and his spirits sank at first view of the eerie old castle which they were fast approaching with every stroke of the big grey horse's rapid trot.

The road, which as yet had led chiefly through great desolate tracts of heather-covered moorland, now began to wind upwards in gradual gyrations ; for Ercildoun Castle stood very high—so high

that the great shoulder of rock on which it was built quite shut out all view of the sea until one had almost reached the very place itself. Within one hundred yards of the wide entrance into the old paved courtyard, which lay at the back of the castle on its *inland* side, the road swept round a sudden curve on to a wide rocky plateau, from whence a strangely glorious view met Alan Dering's wondering eyes.

At last the sea itself lay before him, but so far down below that the sea-gulls floating on the white-crested waves, looked like mere specks of foam in the distance. Sheer and straight, from out of the very waves, rose the grand rugged cliffs known as Ercildoun Head, on the very highest of which towered the old castle, grim and grey. Half of the immense pile was obviously in ruins, and Alan could see the setting sun shining

right through the great arched windows of a smaller tower like a chapel, which, being built on the outer cliff, seemed hanging over the very sea itself. Long bits of broken, crumbling walls, and two or three ruined towers, joined the old chapel on to the main building itself, and here again a strange desolation met the eye. For every window that had lattice panes in it, there were at least three or four perfectly guiltless of either glass or anything else ; and the ivy hung in masses over these ruined casements, giving an impression of utter darkness and loneliness within.

Not a living creature seemed about the place, not a sound stirred the air, save the hoarse cry of the sea-birds as they flew to and fro below the cliffs, and truly Alan's heart sank within him at sight of the wild and desolate abode where he had

so rashly consented to entomb himself for many indefinite hours.

The gaunt grey horse never slackened pace until he had swung into the great courtyard, rattling the crazy old vehicle behind him most ruthlessly over the rough [cobble-stones which paved it throughout.

Mr. Dering sprang out of the carriage and looked about him helplessly. The “mummy,” without speaking a word, proceeded slowly to unharness the horse and then to lead the latter into a place looking more like a dungeon than a stable,—so dark was the entrance, so solid was the stone archway leading into it.

Finding no one inclined to take out his luggage, or even his wraps, fishing rods, gun cases, and other innumerable small comforts with which he invariably travelled, Alan came to the conclusion

it were better to do it himself; and then having accomplished this task at last, he stood shivering and disconsolate in the keen autumn air, looking vainly around for the welcome which apparently had on this occasion totally failed him.

“I am so sorry you have been waiting here, Mr. Dering,” said a quiet voice behind him at last. “I did not know you had come; the sea-fowl are so noisy to-night, that they quite drowned all sound of wheels.”

As Mr. Dering turned round, Cecil Ruthven stood before him holding out her hand in the so long retarded welcome, and a sudden changed feeling of confidence and rest seemed to creep over him at sound of her clear soothing voice.

“Yes, their voices aren’t of the most melodious,” he assented laughingly; “but I suppose you are too used to them to mind?”

“Oh no, I don’t mind them. They are ‘company’ you see,” and the simple words brought home to her auditor’s mind a realization of what life must be like midst such loneliness as this !

Cecil Ruthven looked much the same as on the day of Mrs. Graham’s well-remembered fête, only instead of the white dress worn then, she now wore one of plain brown Holland, but with the self-same black velvet hat which Alan could well recollect hearing severely criticised by the Misses Gobang and Sandbag on that memorable day.

“Let us go in, you must be cold,” said Miss Ruthven, and she led the way towards a heavy oaken door studded with large iron nails, which was evidently the only *usable* entrance into Ercildoun Castle.

The door creaked dismally on its

hinges and opened itself slowly, as if in surly discontent at the intrusion of stranger steps within its portals, and then shut to again with a reproachful crash, which irresistibly reminded Mr. Dering of a peevish, "I told you so!"

They wound their way through long and vaulted stone passages; up stone steps did they mount, down stone stairs did they descend, and still no living creature save his conductress and himself seemed to inhabit this cheerless pile of ruin and desolation.

At last they reached a wide staircase of black oak, surmounted on each side by a quaint balustrade, ornamented with carven cherubim in impossible attitudes—and turning short to the right, Cecil threw open a door and led the way into a large high hall, the warmer temperature of which gave notice that it was one

of the residential spots in the huge mansion.

In reality, it was almost the *only* habitable room in the castle, a fact which had not dawned upon Mr. Dering's mind as yet, and so it were as well to describe it.

In length about eighty feet, in width nearly forty, and of a height apparently incalculable, there was yet an air of rough comfort about this vast room which was pleasing to the eye and soothing to the senses. The entrance door was right in the centre, and at each end of the hall was a large open fireplace, and the great turf and wood fires roaring in each, gave a bright, cheerful aspect to the huge chamber, lighting up the dark panelled walls as the narrow turret windows alone could assuredly not have done, and bringing out strange lights and

shadows on the many iron shields and suits of armour with which the walls were covered.

On a carpeting of coarse matting, and before one of the two fireplaces, stood a long table covered with its white cloth, obviously the general dinner table; whilst at the other end of the vast hall, several armchairs pulled round the fire, a few bookcases and small tables, and a general litter of books and work, made it evident that this side officiated as the "drawing-room" of the mansion.

Between these two ends of the room here was no furniture at all save an occasional strip of matting on the floor, and one great long table running lengthways to the hall, on which lay a mixed assemblage of guns, fishing-rods, dog-chains and couples, and many other implements of sport.

The only noticeable difference between the two ends of the grand old hall, was a deep recess and bay window which jutted out of that one looked upon as a "drawing-room," the well-cushioned seats of which were most suggestive of repose and comfort to the weary.

"Come and sit by the fire and get warm," said Miss Ruthven, moving a big armchair comfortably near to the blaze.

"What a glorious view!" burst from Alan Dering's lips, as, advancing to the bay window, he found himself looking down sheer and straight on to the sea beneath, wreaths of spray mounting high into the air with the concussion of each great wave as it shattered and divided against the face of the steep cliff. The casement window was half open, and the keen salt air blew into his face like the very breath of the sea. The unutterable

wildness of the scene, lit up as it was by the red rays of a fast dying sun, had a strangely saddening effect upon him, and he turned almost shudderingly from the desolation without to the glowing embers of the log fire within, close to which Cecil Ruthven had already ensconced herself.

“Is Lord Ercildoun out shooting?” inquired Mr. Dering, becoming suddenly mindful of the fact that he *had* a host somewhere.

“No; but he is shut up in his study right at the very top of the old tower which you can just see from the far corner of that bay window. When he isn’t shooting, he always spends all his days there, and sometimes his evenings, too,” added Cecil resignedly.

“And what do you do then? Are you always alone?”

“Generally. But if it’s very lonely of an evening, I make old Janet come up from downstairs and sit with me, and she tells me some of her stories. I’m so glad you’ve come,” added the girl frankly, “for now I shall have you to talk to instead.”

“I’ll do my best, Miss Ruthven,” responded Mr. Dering, as in duty bound; but truth to tell, most grievous misgivings were coming into his mind regarding his own chance of amusement in such a life as the one just described.

“Does your father read much then? or write? or what?” inquired Alan further, casting a curious glance up at the ivy-covered old tower which he could just catch a glimpse of from where he sat, and where the weird old Lord was supposed to be sitting up aloft, like an owl in an ivy bush.

“He’s an astronomer,” said Cecil; “at least that’s what they call people who study the stars, don’t they?”

“Yes, I think so,” answered Alan, aloud; and to himself he muttered, “truly, my prospects of a lively visit are on the increase!”

“Curses on ye, Janet!” broke in the sound of an angry voice on the stairs outside, and a heavy shuffling step was heard approaching the door. “Have ye no a tongue in your head, woman, that ye might have told me of a stranger’s arrival? Ye’re little like the rest of your sex if ye *haven’t*, curse them all!” and the voice died away in a growl as of muttering thunder.

“That’s my father,” observed Miss Ruthven; and Alan was scarcely surprised that he could detect little of filial affection in her tone.

The door opened, and Mr. Dering almost started at sight of the weird-looking old man who now advanced towards them.

Towering far above the ordinary height of men, but with a bent head sunk almost on to his breast, his white hair hanging over the collar of a long black velvet coat, and one hand shading the small, suspicious dark eyes which peered rapidly on every side of him as he walked, Lord Ercildoun was perhaps as strange a specimen of the human race as ever eye fell on. Nor was the harsh rasping voice, like the grating of a rusty saw, much more genial than his whole appearance when, giving Mr. Dering his hand, he said :

“Welcome to Ercildoun, as any relative of my friend John Dumaresque must ever be.”

In spite of the kindly sounding words, the suspicious little dark eyes travelled ceaselessly up and down Alan's face and figure with an "I-don't-trust-you-or-any-body" look, highly aggravating to the latter; and it was with decided relief on the whole that, before many minutes had passed, he accepted his host's offer to be shown his own room, with a view to preparing for the approaching festivity of dinner.

CHAPTER VII.

LADY HÉLÈNE.

“What wonder that I loved her thus, that night?
The Immortals know each other at first sight,
And Love is of them.

* * * *

I knew in a moment what our lives must be
Henceforth. It lighten'd on me then and there.
How she was irretrievably all mine,
I hers—thro' time, become eternity. ,
It could not have been otherwise,
Gazing into those eyes.”

Eros.

THE room in which Alan found himself was nearly as large as the great hall just beneath it, and like the latter it too looked straight down on to the sea, further below than ever.

The floor and the plain white-washed

walls were both almost totally bare, save where a strip of matting, or a square of fine old tapestry, made an occasional oasis in the desert of general desolation. Another large open fireplace well filled with burning peat, and piled up with bits of log, lent some sort of cheerfulness to the otherwise intensely dreary apartment; but the immense, funereal-looking bed, with sombre, dark-green curtains all round it, gave a most sinister aspect to the darkest corner of the room.

“It’s as well I am not of a nervous disposition,” observed Mr. Dering to himself, on being left alone in this lugubrious apartment; but as he had been informed by the “mummy” (alias Davie Murray, and the sole surviving servitor of the house of Ercildoun) that dinner would be ready in ten minutes, there was little time to think of anything save how

best to struggle into evening clothes within the time appointed.

Alan Dering was one of those men who invariably dressed well and suitably on every occasion in life, a fact upon which in his secret heart he was apt extremely to pride himself; but to-night he put away decisively the spotless white tie which as a rule would have completed his toilet when encountering strangers, and laughed aloud as he thought of the “mummy’s” probable bewilderment at sight of an article of apparel which, so far as old Davie’s experience went, was confined to the minister alone as yet.

When he once more descended into the great hall, Alan found his host sitting exactly where he had left him, and evidently the matters of the toilet were of small account to Lord Ercildoun.

Wandering to and fro at the farther

end of the hall, engaged in laying plates and otherwise busying herself, was a grey-haired old crone in a black gown, with a high, white coif on her head, and a white handkerchief crossed over her breast. This was old Janet, once Miss Ruthven's nurse, and now general manager and purveyor to the small establishment.

Close beside her father sat Cecil herself, in the selfsame white dress which she had worn on the occasion of Mrs. Graham's *fête*, but instead of Eucharis lilies, a bunch of scarlet rowan-berries was placed in her neatly braided hair. The latter attempt at ornament was viewed by old Janet with most evident disfavour, for as she drew near to put fresh logs upon the smouldering embers of the fire, she muttered angrily, "The lass is daft to mak' sae licht o' the fairies' ain berries!"

Apparently Miss Ruthven was quite accustomed to the prejudices and superstitions of her ancient handmaiden, for she vouchsafed no comment, but only sat staring into the fire with the far-away look of old in her eyes, which made Alan realise more vividly than ever what a strange and perplexing community he found himself condemned to dwell amongst.

Had he only known it, perhaps the most incongruous figure of those now assembled in old Ercildoun's great hall, was that of Alan himself; for a stranger contrast than his graceful, highbred face and figure and thoroughly well-fitting modern evening clothes, with the rough, old-fashioned furniture and quaint old-world figures surrounding him, could scarce be imagined.

But though the *ménage* was of the

simplest, and the staff of attendants confined to old Davie and Janet alone, Mr. Dering was fain to confess that little fault could be found with either the "cock-a-leekie" soup, the sea-trout, Scotch mutton, and grouse, which formed the staple portion of his dinner, backed up by the orthodox north-country delicacy of cranberry tart. The wine, too, was good enough, and the Scotch whiskey, which he tasted at the earnest solicitation of his host, was simply *sans reproche*, perhaps even suspiciously excellent, when the near vicinity of contraband traders was considered.

Before half the evening had passed by, Lord Ercildoun rose up unceremoniously, and without even a word of apology beyond a brief "good night," took himself off to his lonely tower once more, leaving to Cecil the task of entertaining their somewhat astounded guest.

That Miss Ruthven felt the absence of her father to be on the whole somewhat of a relief, was proved by the brighter gaiety of her manner and speech the instant that the door was closed on that worthy old autocrat; and with a case full of cigarettes placed, by permission, conveniently close to his arm-chair, Alan felt there might be many less satisfactory situations in the world than his own at this particular instant. The wind was rising fast outside, and the iron-framed casements rattled drearily as it howled through their chinks and crevices; but inside there was warmth and light in plenty, and a girl's clear, low laugh, making the old hall re-echo with the glad sound.

“I must say this old fireplace is charmingly comfortable,” remarked Mr. Dering, complacently, and giving one of the big logs a kick with his foot as he spoke,

sending a shower of sparks flying up the wide chimney.

“I’m so glad you’re comfortable,” answered Cecil, anxiously, “for I feared it would be so miserable for you here, after such a splendid house as Mr. Graham’s. But there really is good fishing, Mr. Dering—splendid sea-fishing—and shooting too; so I hope you won’t be very dull.”

“I’m sure I shan’t, Miss Ruthven. Why should you think so?” And indeed Cecil looked so pretty and rare as she sat leaning her chin on her hand in the flickering firelight, that Mr. Dering felt quite convinced in his own mind of the truth of his asseveration.

“Well, that’s all right, then,” responded his young hostess, cheerfully, and quite unconscious of her visitor’s evidently fast-deepening admiration.

“Tell me the story which is attached to this place, Miss Ruthven, will you? the ghost story, I mean,” said Alan, after a long pause, only filled up by the dreary moaning of the wind through each crack in the doors and windows of the great hall.

Cecil laughed. “Are you a believer in ghosts, Mr. Dering? I should have thought you were too prosaic for that.”

This accusation caused singular displeasure to Mr. Dering, as at that moment he was conscious of an unusual feeling of dreamy excitement, and even to be in a frame of mind bordering almost on the sentimental. So it made him cross—a not unusual result when a companion’s spirit is not akin to one’s own—and he answered rather shortly—

“I’m not going to rehearse the articles of my belief in *anything*, Miss Ruthven,

especially as I have doubts whether I possess any."

"Not believe in *anything*!" and Cecil's eyes opened wide in calm surprise. "That's quite impossible, Mr. Dering," and some indignation crept into Miss Ruthven's tone, as she decided in her own mind that her visitor was trying to make fun of her.

"What should I believe in?" asked Allan, looking amused in spite of himself.

"Your friends, for one thing," answered Cecil, gravely.

"Yes, I have one or two friends worth almost everything in the world, certainly," assented Mr. Dering. "It is not my friends which I do not believe in, it is *friendship*."

Cecil looked puzzled, and Alan continued:

"Friendship of the nineteenth century

is a thing to be held in great contempt, to my thinking. Men or women have only to make themselves thoroughly notorious, no matter how, for half the world to have their name on its lips, and for their acquaintance and their society to be dearly treasured by fashion's followers and fledgelings. No, friendship is too great a name for a thing so slight ! ”

“ I agree with you, if *that* were friendship,” was Miss Ruthven’s quiet answer.

“ You are too young yet to judge of what is and what isn’t,” went on Alan, forgetting for the moment that their ages were the same, and that it was the difference between thorough knowledge of the world and total ignorance of it, which alone made the gulf between them seem so wide. “ But, tell me, what is your idea of friendship ? ”

“ I hardly know myself, but I think

the strongest point would be that it should *never* change."

"And if your friends changed to you? If they were at the top of the wheel and you at the bottom, and they wanted you no longer?"

"The wheel might turn," said Cecil gravely; and then added in a tone more humble than Alan had ever heard her speak in, "I know that one's friendship would not be wanted perhaps were one's friends what you call "at the top of the wheel;" but once the wheel has turned it makes all even, for any one can give sympathy or be sorry for others, even if that is all they have to give."

Once more Mr. Dering felt a doubt recurring to his mind, whether he were altogether right in measuring his companion's views of life by a much lower standard than his own; but before he

had quite satisfied himself on this question, Cecil went on speaking, her hands idly clasped across her knees, and her eyes fixed on the embers of wood as they blazed and blackened alternately with every strong gust of wind that blew down the wide, open chimney straight on to their hot, red faces.

“I cannot understand why *notoriety* should make one care more for a friend, when even fame could not.”

“Do you mean that if you cared, *really* cared, for some one, you would not care for them still more if they succeeded in gaining fame and honour?”

“No, I should not. I should value it for their sake, but for nothing else. But I should care for them for their own sake, and no height or depth to which they might climb or fall would alter the fact that I did so care.”

The look of trust and resolution on the speaker's face made it for the moment absolutely beautiful, and Mr. Dering's eyes unconsciously watched it so long, that a hot blush rose at last to disturb its paleness; whilst Cecil, putting a hand up to each cheek in merry defiance, said laughingly—

“Don't look at me as if you thought I were a wild woman of the woods, and wholly irreclaimable, Mr. Dering! I know that all my ideas must seem strange and old-fashioned to you, but remember, I have time yet, and hope to know better some day.”

“I hope you won't,” answered Alan, more earnestly than the occasion appeared to require. “But we've quite forgotten the ghost story; do tell it me, for I'm quite as likely to believe in that as in anything else, perhaps.”

“ Well, do you see that picture behind you? You must turn right round else you can’t look at it well,” and Cecil put a few more logs on the fire as she spoke, to make the illumination greater.

Alan turned his chair and saw, hanging on the wall near to him, a picture which, till then, had escaped his attention.

A fair and somewhat childish woman’s face, with a curl on the sweet, sad mouth, and a look of proud despair in the grey eyes—the face of one who *might* have sinned, but who assuredly *must* have suffered. The heavy black velvet hood, bordered with pearls, which, falling back from her head, still entirely covered her shoulders and arms, threw out in even greater contrast the dazzlingly fair face; and the mournful expression of the latter had a strange resemblance to Miss Ruth-

ven's own, as Alan acknowledged to himself somewhat unwillingly.

The sad eyes were so haunting, too; they seemed to follow every movement of his, and to turn as he turned, move as he moved, until he felt glad to look away from them and listen to Cecil's clear young voice as she told the legend of Ercildoun.

“Many years ago there lived a lord of Ercildoun, who was a most strange, morose, and eccentric old man.” (“Not unlike his successor,” thought her listener.) “Many months of each year he spent in foreign countries, which, as you know, was not a usual proceeding in those days, when each journey took many weeks and days to accomplish; and then he would return suddenly, and when least expected, to Ercildoun Castle, and would shut himself up there in solitary gloom without

any other living soul save the few retainers who always dwelt within its precincts.

“One day, just about the usual time when Lord Ercildoun’s yearly visit might be expected, a messenger arrived bringing somewhat strange tidings: the old lord had wed a fair maiden in some ‘far countrie,’ and rooms were to be got forthwith in readiness for the bride and bridegroom.

“They arrived, and loud were the whispers of astonishment at the extreme youth of the golden-haired bride, whose almost infantine face and form made in truth a strange contrast to her grim lord’s saturnine visage and dark, grizzled locks.

“Hélène—so he called her—seemed happy enough, however, and long and loud were the praises bestowed on the

young Lady Ercildoun; for wherever her sweet face shone it left for sure a ray of sunshine behind, and the sorest heart or the deepest wound seemed to heal irresistibly under her bright magic influence.

“There was sorrow in Ercildoun when the usual time for their lord’s departure drew near; for would it not also rob them of the only thing which lent life and light to their sad existence? But, after many months of weary waiting, the day of return came at last.

“Could *this* be the beautiful, bright-hearted child Hélène, Lady Ercildoun—this weary, stricken girl, whose mournful eyes seemed twice too large for her pale and shrunken face? whose mouth trembled and quivered piteously with each word she spoke, who cowered and shivered at every sound?

“Truly it was she; but what had caused the change none ever knew, for the grim old lord had grown more taciturn than ever, and the girl herself seldom or never spoke. For hours each day would she remain in the little chapel of the castle, built on the furthest rock of all hanging over the sea, with her hands clasped on the window-sill, looking out across the ocean, and with eyes ever fixed on the far-distant horizon, watching patiently, watching sadly,—never ceasing.

“Rumours there were of a strange ship being seen off Ercildoun Head, which dared to sail so near in to that dreaded headland as to cause the simple fisher-folk to believe it to be a phantom vessel, and that its crew must bear charmed lives. The bright lamp burning night and day in the chapel window cast its

steady light out to sea, and was replenished with anxious care whensoever the oil sank low by the devotional hand of the Lady of Ercildoun.

“For several months the phantom ship had come and gone, and the time again drew near for Ercildoun to temporarily lose its lord; when a strange messenger came to the castle one day and craved speech of him.

“What passed between them history says not, but the messenger departed with a sardonic smile of triumph on his black, evil-looking face, and the old lord grew grimmer than before.

“At midnight as the young Lady Ercildoun stood trimming the oil lamp in the chapel window with careful hand, she started in affright to hear a loud heavy step echoing on the stone flags of the aisle, and turning, she saw her husband standing before her.

“Not one word did he speak, but in an instant the lamp was extinguished, and intense darkness reigned throughout the chapel, save where a ray of moonlight lit up the towering dark figure of the husband, the shrinking form of the wife.

“‘Now we will wait and watch together!’ laughed he, in harsh merriment. ‘And we will see what the night brings forth.’

“Not one word answered the terrified girl; but she buried her face in her hands, and only a heart-broken moan escaped her white lips.

“‘The time has come,’ said Lord Ercildoun at length; ‘rise up, Madame, to see the last of the gay young lover who wooed so well.’

“More dead than alive, he dragged the miserable girl to the window, and in the false, hazy light, a ship could be seen

close in to the land, and dangerously near to the cruel, terrible rocks. No saving light was there to warn them of the danger, no hope should they approach even half a cable's length nearer to the treacherous Ercildoun Head!

“A few minutes dead silence, broken only by the steady surging of the wild waste of waters on the rocks below, and a woman's quick hurried breathing, then the suspense is ended. One terrible crash, a cry of many voices in despair, re-echoed by one from a broken heart above—and all is still.

“When morning dawned, a sad and sorrowful sight was seen on Ercildoun's rocky shore. A few shattered timbers lay there, telling of the wreck of some goodly ship, and bound to a mast lay the body of a fair-haired, Saxon youth, with a lock of long golden hair clasped tightly to his breast.

“They carried him into the castle hall and old Lord Ercildoun laughed grimmer than ever, as he noted the colour of that love-lock held so close to the dead man’s heart; but never a word issued from the pale lips of his young wife. For hours she sat there, still, as one who is stunned by a mighty stroke, then towards night she staggered back to the chapel window above the sea, crying and moaning and wringing her hands, for him who would return no more.

“All through the livelong night, resounded her sorrowful wailing, but with morning light it suddenly ceased. Moved by curiosity, they entered the chapel with failing hearts and trembling feet, only to find the morning sun shining down on the altar, and on the still, dead face of one who lay before its cross—Hélène, Lady Ercildoun.”

CHAPTER VIII.

MISERERE DOMINE.

“ White steeds of ocean, that leap with a hollow and wearisome roar

On the bar of ironstone steep, and not a fathom's length from the shore,

Is there never a seer nor sophist can interpret your wild refrain ?

* * * * *

You come, and your crests are hoary with the foam of your countless years ;

You break, with a rainbow of glory, through the spray of your glittering tears.

Is your song a song of gladness ? a pæan of joyous might ?

Or a wail of discordant sadness for the wrongs you can never right ?

For the empty seat by the ingle ? for children reft of their sire ?

For the bride, sitting sad, and single, and pale, by the flickering fire ?

For your ravenous pools of suction ? for your shattering billow swell ?

For your ceaseless work of destruction ? for your hunger insatiable ?

Not far from this very place, on the sand and the shingle
dry,
He lay, with his batter'd face upturn'd to the frowning sky.
When your waters wash'd and swill'd high over his drown-
ing head,
When his nostrils and lungs were fill'd, when his feet and
hands were as lead,
When against the rock he was hurl'd, and sucked again to
the sea,
On the shores of another world, on the brink of eternity,
On the verge of annihilation, did it come to that swimmer
strong,
The sudden interpretation of your mystical weird-like song."
The Song of the Surf.

A LOUD heavy noise awoke Mr. Dering after he had been asleep a very short time, and as he sat up in bed and listened, vainly did he try to remember where he was and what was happening.

Vague remembrances of the legend of Ercildoun floated through his mind, and they seemed of a surety coming to life as a distant, but plainly audible, cry of despair rang out above the furious blasts of wind which were still raging round the old castle walls.

“What the devil’s up?” muttered he to himself sleepily.

The answer came in a repetition of the heavy dull sound he had heard before, and there was no mistaking it now, it was the sound of a minute gun at sea.

To spring out of bed and rush to the window was the work of a moment only, but nothing could be seen in the great darkness save a blinding spray of foam and surf, and the black outline of the ruin-crested headland.

Sounds of much hurrying to and fro, and the loud harsh voice of Lord Ercildoun giving his orders and commands, told Alan that the household was on the alert, and hastily dressing himself, he descended as quickly as possible.

Not a soul was there, and the great oak door which led into the courtyard was wide open, and creaking in loud

protestation as the wild wind swayed it to and fro at will. Judging rightly that his companions had already made their way to the rocks below, Mr. Dering followed them there.

In a very few strides he had reached the scene of action, guided thereto by the faint light burning in the window of a rough hut, built for shelter to the living and the dead. He shuddered when, in passing by, he glanced in and noted the withered form of old Janet moving to and fro, stirring the blaze, and laying out a table with blankets—for *what*?

Silent and awe-struck, Alan Dering joined the small group now standing on the outermost ledge of rock which was safe from the waves' powerful reach.

The inky blackness of the night, the blinding spray which every instant dashed over all, the loud, continuous roar of

both wind and waves, broken every now and then by the sullen despairing voice of the minute gun, seemed almost to stun him and render him powerless to move. But as his eyes got more accustomed to the faint light from the fire within the hut, he saw Lord Ercildoun standing with the end of a rope in his hand, and close beside him was his daughter, shading her eyes with her hand, and peering out anxiously into the darkness.

A cry louder than before rings out. "Good God! how near they are!" bursts from Cecil's lips.

"We canna do owt," observes old Davie, *sotto voce*.

"Try once more; quick!" thunders out Lord Ercildoun's voice; and in an instant the loud whizz of a rocket makes Alan involuntarily start back.

High into the air like a narrow arch of fire, it flies on its mission of mercy, and reveals for one instant the last act of the impending tragedy, then falls hissing into the waves, leaving the black night even darker than before. In that momentary glimpse a woful sight is seen. A large dismasted schooner, her deck crowded with loudly wailing and madly despairing forms, is drifting slowly and steadily on to where masses of white foam, thrown high into the air, reveal the presence of the jagged rocks which are waiting even now for their prey.

There is a loud, terrible crash, like the falling to earth of some mighty tree;—one wild, heart-broken cry resounds, and then a still more terrible silence reigns over all.

“Another rocket!” commands Lord Ercildoun, a tremble of horror and excite-

ment even in his harsh voice ; and once more the fiery messenger goes on its way.

Close to them now is the wrecked ship, with one end looming high out of the water like some gigantic rearing quadruped, the other concealed by the huge rollers which each instant are dashing over it, and over the sharp, sunken rock which has gored its way into the side of the doomed ship. But no living soul is to be seen on the broken, splintered deck ; and though a mass of floating timbers darkens the foam around, nothing human is visible amongst them.

For many minutes the terrible watch goes on, and Alan Dering marvels vaguely at the awful dreariness of the scene ; the two old men, with hands shading their eyes, peering anxiously into the wild surging mass of water before them, and the slight girl at their side, leaning for-

ward with pale, set face, to lend the assistance of her young eyes to their aged ones.

At last there is a rent in the clouds, as far away in the east arises the faint light of dawn ; and the first sight which greets the new-born day is the face of a drowned man, as his body drifts slowly backwards and forwards on the swell of each great angry sullen wave.

“ Tie an end of the rope to me, there *might* be life in him ! ” says Alan, hurriedly ; and almost before they have time to grasp his meaning his coat is off and he has plunged into the foam.

“ Have a care ! ye’ll no live an ye touch the rocks,” roared old Davie, in terrified warning ; and Cecil’s brave heart seemed to fail her then as she watched the hard and desperate struggle between the swimmer and the sea.

Twice he is beaten back, and rolled over and over, by the headlong violence of the waves; but young, strong, and a practised swimmer, he at last reaches the drowned man's side. As he nears him, battling for each inch of space which still lies between, he can see that it is the body of a sailor, and for an instant he almost believes that there is life and hope there yet, for as the body rises and falls with the swell of the tide, the long arms sway backwards and forwards with an almost lifelike movement, as if beckoning a welcome to the rescuer. But as Alan grasps the sailor's body with one arm, the lifeless hand accidentally touches his own, and the awful deadly cold of that touch convinces him shudderingly that his errand has been a fruitless one. But tied tightly with a scarf to the dead man's shoulders is a very young child, its little

waxen-white face bearing still the impress of terror stamped upon it by that night of horrors to which it had woke up suddenly from its peaceful sleep.

The double weight tells heavily on Alan Dering, and he can now see a deep red scar across the drowned man's forehead, which precludes almost the possibility of any hope for his existence ; but still he will not give up the struggle yet, not whilst life and breath are left to him. Twice are they torn asunder, the living and the dead, by the wild fury of the waves, but the same tide sweeps them both in towards land, and Alan regains his grasp immediately. It is nearly over now, and he can plainly hear the hoarse tones of old Davie Murray (the "mummy" had apparently found a voice when wanted) exhorting him to hold on, and giving incoherent instructions, which Alan is

too bewildered and blinded with foam and spray either to hear or heed ; and then all at once he feels himself sinking, feels his breath labouring agonizedly for an instant, then a dull sound of rushing water in his ears ; and it is nearly two dead men, not one alone, which Lord Ercildoun and his trusty henchman pull with help of the rope on to shore at last.

When Alan Dering once more recovered consciousness, the early morning light shone through the pale and shadowy mist-wreaths which hung over land and sea ; lighting up the rocky shore, and the old grey castle towering above,—the weather-beaten faces of two living men, the calm still face of one dead.

In a short time he felt able to walk, and at Lord Ercildoun's suggestion, staggered on to his feet with the intention of returning to the castle and to

bed; more especially as it was not in the power of mortal man to do more for the crew of the ill-fated schooner which had only too surely earned the terrible epitaph, "All hands lost."

As he passed the rough hut, he glanced in, and on the table, so carefully prepared by Janet, lay the body of the little drowned child, and by its side knelt Cecil Ruthven. Her face was buried in her hands, and her whole form shook convulsively as she struggled to restrain the bitter tears which were falling fast. No sound broke the stillness save the dull monotonous drip, drip, of the water, as slowly it oozed its way from off the table and trickled on to the floor.

Was *this* the sort of experience "likely to harden a woman's heart," as he himself had once said? And Alan Dering went on his way with a grave, downcast face.

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT IS FATE ?

“O, what was once to me
Mere matter of the fancy, now has grown
The vast necessity of heart and life.”

Vivien.

“And this is an old fairy-tale of the heart.
It is told in all lands, in a different tongue ;
Told with tears by the old, heard with smiles by the young.
And the tale to each heart unto which it is known
Has a different sense.”

Lucile.

THE sun had run half its course ere, late in the day, Mr. Dering descended into the great hall of Ercildoun, with a sound body and mind, but a somewhat shaky gait, having scarcely even yet recovered from the desperate struggle of the previous hours.

He found Cecil busily engaged in copying out some almost illegible notes, written on a scrap of paper in her father's cramped and crooked handwriting; but her pen was hastily thrown aside, and a frank, warm welcome given to the new-comer.

"You look a bit shaken yet, Mr. Dering," she said, anxiously.

"Oh, I'm all right," returned Alan, with British untruth, and trying to hide how excessively glad he was to sink into the arm chair, which she had hastily pushed into the sunny bay-window for him.

But Miss Ruthven was a quick observer, and with infinite tact pretended to be deeply occupied in putting away her paper and writing things, until her visitor should have time to recover from the evident exertion which the descent

of a long, steep staircase had been to him. Still, to stay upstairs in his own room he had felt to be utterly impossible, for every hour, and each minute of the hour, was there growing upon him more and more the power of a strange new fascination.

It was the faint evidence of greater strength in Cecil Ruthven's character than in his own, which so attracted his somewhat dreamy, indolent nature; for like all men who are at bottom thoroughly resolute and determined, he was easily led in trifles by any stronger character than his own, if only the reins were in well-loved hands. There lay the secret of Alan Dering's character: drive him, no one on earth could, but to lead him was easy enough, for he liked letting himself be led.

They had discussed the terrible events

of the night before, sadly and seriously; and as Cecil's voice trembled in speaking of his unsuccessful attempt at rescuing those whom no mortal hand might rescue, Alan felt in his heart that he had at least earned her respect, if he might never lay claim to anything more.

But, "could he be satisfied with that much alone?" was the question which in all surprise he now asked himself; for only so short a time ago, few things had seemed more unlikely than that he, Alan Dering, should fall in love with Lord Ercildoun's daughter, like the veriest schoolboy shut up for the first time in a country house with some pretty face.

Vainly he tried to turn his eyes from that fair frank face opposite to him, and to devote his attention to the sea, as the tide rolled in far down below in great green, white-crested waves. The peace

after the storm had come, now too late, and the sun shone down on a smiling sea all glowing with lights and shades, as if the last night's tragedy were surely but a sleeper's half-waking dream. Yet even as he gazed, a dark mass of timber drifted on to the rocks and was shattered into a thousand fragments against their iron face, the last remnant of the ill-fated schooner.

"Didn't you say you had some sketches to shew me?" asked Cecil after a while.

"Only a few very rough attempts at it," answered Alan.

"Then may I see if I can find them?" replied the girl eagerly, and before Mr. Dering had time to apologise for his inability to go and fetch them for her, he heard her light step in the room overhead, and in another moment she re-

entered the hall, holding out triumphantly his little portfolio of sketches.

They were, as he said, rough, but with a true touch of art about them; and yet one could plainly note that the artist was far stronger in perceptive power than in executive, for though the wild dreaminess of each sketch was strangely fascinating, the effect was often marred by false strokes or impossible lights and shades.

One by one they turned them over; here a sketch of some Highland loch, set like a gem in its frame of crimson-brown heather, and with no living thing save one lonely heron to disturb its utter stillness; there, a sunny vineyard in Italy, where the dark-eyed children of the South are playing with the clusters of purple grapes; then again, some scene taken where the Mediterranean's blue waves glide curling into a shore overhung

with gardens full of myrtle and orange trees, like a child's dream of some far-off fairy land.

"Oh, this is the best of all, Mr. Dering!" exclaimed Cecil at length, holding out a sketch on which her eyes were riveted with a sort of unconscious fascination.

In truth, it was a strange enough scene. A clear sky, without one single cloud to break its monotonous expanse, a scorching, tropical sun, shining down on undulating hills covered with long grass of an uniform dreary brown, and a fierce grass fire spreading sullenly over one hillside, leaving a wide black track of devastation to mark its course. Close to this, but as yet untouched by the fire, lay the bodies of two dead bullocks; but in the whole picture there was not one bit of life visible, nor any living thing

save a large vulture almost motionless in the air, hovering like some bird of ill-omen over the fire's black and deadly track. Underneath the sketch was written one word of ominous import, "Desolation."

"What an odd picture for you to take a fancy to!" laughed Alan Dering. "I can't say that it was a very cheery scene, the day I saw it. But you, do you not also draw, Miss Ruthven?"

"Yes, as much as I can. But since Father Dubois died, there has been no one to give me even the few useful hints which he always gave, and so I have struggled on alone, but I don't get on as well as I could wish."

"I've shown you *my* sketches, with all their faults and failings, Miss Ruthven; won't you let me see yours now?"

"Oh yes, gladly. Perhaps you will be

able to help me, if you do not mind the trouble ;” and Miss Ruthven rose at once to fetch a bundle of drawings which were hidden in the very farthest corner of the room.

Alan Dering positively started with astonishment, as one by one they were laid carelessly before his wondering gaze. Not that they were anything save the roughest of oil-paintings, the most unfinished of works, but there was originality and a rare power in each study, and he was true enough artist to recognise this fact. The sketches were all either “heads” or figures ; most being evidently the embodied ideals of Miss Ruthven’s favourite heroines ; for the sweet bright face of “Rosalind” shared the same canvas with the weird, unearthly sadness of “Undine’s,” and the loving, passionate eyes of “Juliet” looked

askance at the wild dusky face of "Falling Water," the pride of a Comanche chief's wigwam. But each sketch carried a strange, subtle power with it, rough though they all might be as a whole—the power of *reality* ; and no one reading the marvellous, living embodiment which those simple lines and careless touches gave of each ideal, could fail to recognize a master hand therein.

"But they are perfect, quite perfect!" exclaimed Mr. Dering, wonderingly. "They seem to live, they seem to breathe ; I don't know how it is, but I never saw anything like these sketches of yours before, Miss Ruthven?"

"I dare say not," laughed his auditor.

"No, I am quite serious. Of course I don't mean to say that they are finished works of art, that would be nonsense ; but they have a power and a *reality* about

them which fascinates me beyond everything. You might be a great artist, Miss Ruthven, if only you would study hard."

"Would? It is '*could*,' you ought to say. I'd work night and day if it were possible; I'd give up every pleasure on earth for the sake of studying painting, if only I might ensure success at last!"

The last words were spoken in a dreamy undertone, but the light which had dawned in the eyes of the speaker revealed how deep down in her heart lay a wealth of dormant ambition.

Alan Dering was watching her face narrowly and observed, "I should not have thought you would have cared for study or really hard work, having always been accustomed to a solitary, dreamy, idle life—more like some idyll in a poem."

"Perhaps that is the very reason why

I long so much to be 'up and doing,'” said Cecil eagerly.

“Believe me, standing still is much pleasanter work than running,” remarked Alan Dering in a tone of nonchalant and heartfelt idleness.

“Believe me, that ‘standing still’ is only a prettier and more poetic version of the verb ‘to retrograde,’” was the quick and grave response.

Mr. Dering remained silent, and wondered in his heart how it came to pass that his companion’s views of life were so much sterner than his own.

Was it that, having been cut off from all human sympathy, nature alone had formed her? For the rivers and mountains of that lone Border Land seemed in some strange way to have imbued her spirit with their own clearness and strength. Trusting and fearless as a

savage who knows no danger, having a wild code of her own of honour and justice, which might drive her to do grand, unselfish deeds, such as wreck so many lives and save so few, the words which could best describe such a character as Cecil Ruthven's now, were surely, "sans peur, et sans reproche."

A slow shuffling step was heard ascending the stairs ere long, and old Janet entered laden with an apron full of fir logs for the fire, and curtsying gravely, asked after Mr. Dering's health.

"Oh, I'm all right, thank you, Janet," said Alan. "Only your North sea is a little rough in its play at times!"

"It was no playin' the nicht," answered Janet, looking round her superstitiously lest there were other ears hearkening than she wot of. "I tellt auld Davie three hoors afore, that there was aye meeschief

brewin', but whether by land or by sea, wha could tell ? "

"How could you know there was mischief brewing, Janet?" asked Cecil impatiently, to whom the woeful prophecies of her ancient handmaiden were no novelty.

"Didn't I see the rowan-berries in yer ain locks?" retorted the old woman, almost fiercely. "An' I tried to tell ye, an' ye wadna heed! But *they*—'the fameeliar speerits wha peep and mutter,' as the book says—they harrd, and they *heeded*," she added, significantly. "We canna hold our ain when the speerits o' the Lord are agin' us;" and the old crone left the room at last, semi-praying, semi-cursing, and wholly grumbling.

"Janet seems perturbed," laughed Alan, as the door closed behind her.

"Yes. I'm afraid it is more my un-

believing spirit than her credulous one, which has put her out. I don't believe in such things, and can't pretend that I do—do you?"

"I scarcely know what I do and what I do not believe in."

"But you can't possibly think that there are such things as 'spirits?'" exclaimed Cecil, with profound astonishment.

"No, I don't mean spirits, perhaps, so much as what I call 'luck,' and sentimental people would call 'Fate.'"

"I scarcely know what that means, I think. My ideas of 'spirits' are taken from Janet's familiars, who appear to no one but her own self, and seem always to do harm—never good. I *can't* believe in those."

"Look at the reproachful eyes of your ancestress, on the wall up there, watch-

ing you as you speak. Isn't she, too, supposed to leave her well-earned rest in the grave, and wander about the chapel at night, bewailing the past ? ”

Cecil turned and confronted the picture, its sad eyes meeting her own with an almost living look of reproach. She said, gravely—

“Now that you say it, I see the look in her eyes which you mean ; an odd, reproachful pleading. No, Lady Hélène, I cannot believe the fishermen's stories of either your appearance in the chapel window at midnight, or the phantom ship sailing below ! Unless,” and Cecil laughed merrily, “the phantom ship contains smuggled goods, and the light is one not placed by ghostly hands.”

“Yes, I dare say it is something of that sort which has gained Ercildoun its reputation,” said Alan, carelessly.

“But what is *your* ghost, Mr. Dering? What is it that people call Fate?”

“It is a power we cannot fight against, I know that! It means that, perhaps, two people who are strangers to each other and never likely to cross each other’s paths, will, if fated to do so, not only meet, but probably love or hate each other as Fate has willed it. It means that every strong will may be bent, every strong resolution be broken, before its fatal power; that all our striving from the cradle to the grave may avail us nothing, and that across the failure of our highest hopes and the ruin of our bravest hearts is oftentimes written the one word, ‘Kismet.’”

Cecil looked very grave now, as once more she glanced up at the picture hanging above her, and, nodding her head to it, said slowly—

“You need not look so reproachful, Lady Hélène, if this be true, for your revenge will surely come.”

“What *are* you speaking about ? ”

“There is a saying, ‘who weds a Ruthven tempts Fate,’ and I never understood what it meant before. But if it is as you say, and there *is* such a thing as Fate, well it’s a bad look-out for my future husband, isn’t it ? ”

Had the unconscious speaker glanced for one instant at Mr. Dering’s face, she could scarce have misconstrued the expression legible thereon. How gladly would he chance any fate on earth, so *that* were the reward ! And yet, so great was the control which this girl’s calm frankness of manner had over his perturbed spirit, that he, who ere this moment had scarcely known what it was to either welcome or dread a woman’s

answer, had no power left to speak one word of all the passionate longing and devotion which shook his very heart and soul, as surely it had, ere this, never before been shaken.

CHAPTER X.

TIME TRIETH TROTH.

“ Not in Hades alone
 Doth Sisyphus roll, ever frustrate, the stone,
 Do the Danaïds ply, ever vainly, the sieve.
 Tasks as futile does earth to its denizens give.
 Yet there’s none so unhappy, but what he hath been
 Just about to be happy, at some time, I ween ;
 And none so beguiled and defrauded by chance,
 But what, once in his life, some minute circumstance
 Would have fully sufficed to secure him the bliss,
 Which, missing it then, he for ever must miss.”

Lucile.

BRIGHT dawned the morning of Alan Dering’s last day at Ercildoun ; and as he stood in the courtyard after breakfast, waiting for his host, he could not but deem shooting, or any other sport likely to lead his reluctant steps far from that

domain, a most unmitigated nuisance, even a decided bore.

True, an arrangement had been made that Cecil should bring out their luncheon to the two shooters, but, having overheard a brief consultation between that young lady and old Janet, he was fain to confess that this plan originated more in the scarcity of idle hands at Ercildoun than in any very earnest desire on Miss Ruthven's part to join their society.

It was always the same, thought Mr. Dering, discontentedly ; no one could be kinder or more hospitable than was his young hostess, often even sweet and lovable to him, like the warm-hearted friend she was,—but nothing more. No single memory of any tenderer feeling, whether true or false, could he call up to soothe his anxious mind, for there was no denying it now, that Alan Dering's hour had come at last.

Lord Ercildoun's harsh voice broke in abruptly upon his meditations.

"I canna shoot with ye to-day, Mr. Dering, for the post has brought me many hours' work," said the old man with his usual scant courtesy and with not one word of apology or regret.

Before Mr. Dering had time to express his outward sorrow, or to realize his inward joy, at this turn of events, his host continued :

"But ye can shoot all the same, lad, for 'Ben' there will work for either stranger or friend so long as they carry a gun."

"Ben," a gaunt, ill-kept black setter, was tugging at his chain behind them with frantic yelps, as if in confirmation of his master's words ; and from sheer lack of pluck to say "No," Mr. Dering found himself marching down the road away

from the castle, accompanied by his host, and cursing his host's dog inwardly with much vigour.

Had that confounded brute been of a less affable disposition, the chances were that he would have been left in peace within those castle walls; and a grim desire to let off one barrel of his breech-loader at this now boisterously capering delinquent, crossed his mind frequently during the next five minutes.

"I'll miss ye, lad, when ye're gone," observed Lord Ercildoun, with a kinder glance than usual at the young, upright figure pacing beside him.

Alan's heart beat quickly; this was not the rose, but it was next thing to the rose, and a rash thought entered his brain; why not sue for the daughter first at her father's hands, as in the good old times of long ago?

There was a long pause, broken twice by Mr. Dering's efforts to make a suitable start on this hazardous topic; but the keen glance which he each time encountered from his incipient father-in-law quite drove his happiest speeches from out his head.

At last, when Lord Ercildoun came to a halt with the intention of returning on his steps once more, the situation became desperate, and Mr. Dering spoke out like a man.

In a few short sentences he expressed his desire to marry Lord Ercildoun's daughter, giving quiet and reasonable surety for her happiness in the future, and of the sufficient means which were his to secure her every ordinary luxury; and there was something so thoroughly frank and loyal in the brave young lover's speech, that the harsh, angry look which

at its commencement had crept over Lord Ercildoun's face, disappeared, and gave place to a much kinder one, as his lordship's little dark eyes were riveted on those of the speaker.

"Ye don't know maybe, Mr. Dering, that my daughter will inherit Ercildoun when I am dead?" and a ray of the old suspicion returned to the small, sharp eyes.

But there was no mistaking the look in the honest hazel-grey ones, which met his own so quietly and fairly, as Alan said—

"No; I had not thought of that."

"And it's just best ye should have the real answer at once, my lad," continued the old man hurriedly, but in a kinder tone. "Ye see, though my daughter will have Ercildoun, the *money* will go to her cousin, Sir Francis Ruthven, and so

we trothed her to him, and they will marry when he comes back from foreign parts, where he has lived these four years back for health's sake."

Like one in a dream, his listener stared at him.

"Engaged to be married *already*?" and Alan's stern set face involuntarily told a tale of how bitterly the blow had gone home.

"Aye, is she," was the laconic response.

After a moment's silence Mr. Dering began to recover his scattered faculties a little, and the utter improbability of Cecil's having ever as yet met any one worthy or likely to win her heart struck him forcibly.

"Does Miss Ruthven know her cousin?" he eagerly enquired.

"No just. His father, mad Sir Philip

as we called him, and myself, we agreed to make the match, and the children consented."

"Then you will marry your daughter to a man she knows nothing of?" exclaimed Alan in hot indignation.

"Just so," acquiesced the imperturbable old lord.

"But if she should care for *me*, Lord Ercildoun, may *I* have no chance?" was the proud, anxious rejoinder.

"Not one. Were Cecil to love ye as sair as woman could, she would never wed ye, nor break her plighted word. My daughter is a Ruthven, and will aye be true to her troth."

There was a stern grandeur in the old man's evil-looking face, as his pride of race spoke out.

None could appreciate the feeling better than Alan Dering himself, and for

an instant he kept silence, wrestling with his own bitterly hopeless thoughts, then he spoke—

“Lord Ercildoun, I give you warning frankly, that if I stay here another twenty-four hours, I shall do my living best to make your daughter break off her engagement. It’s inhuman, it’s wicked, that such a thing should be! How *can* she know her own mind about a man whom she has not even seen?”

“Your pardon, Mr. Dering. Sir Francis Ruthven came here four years sin’ as a blithe lad o’ eighteen, and stayed a day with us; and I mind weel that my daughter and he seemed well affectioned one to the other.”

Alan gnashed his teeth inwardly, and felt in his heart how dearly he would like to see the figure of this “blithe lad o’ eighteen” go bumping down the side

of the rocky precipice on which they stood. But a remembrance of Cecil's calm and always friendly manner disarmed his thoughts of their bitterness, and turning to the old man he said—

“ Well, I shall try my luck, Lord Ercildoun, for it can be no question of *honour* in such a case as this. If you do not care enough for your child to save her from a loveless marriage, *I* care enough to face anything in the whole wide world that she may be free. It shall be one trial only, and a fair one to both ; if *I* win, your daughter shall be my wife as surely as this pebble will reach the sea ” (a splash far down below, echoed the speaker's hot words) ; “ if *he* wins, then I shall quietly bow before Fate, and go my way, and will try to forget the mad folly of the dream I have dreamed to-day ! ”

The young man's stern defiance seemed to please the grim old peer far more than any humbler tone would have done, and he laughed the low harsh cackle peculiar to him, as, laying his withered old hand on Alan's shoulder, he said—

“Ye're a braw lad, there's no denying, and had my word not been given, I'd as lief see yersel lord and master here, as I would that puir delicate lad Francis Ruthven. Were ye John Dumaresque's son, and not his sister's son only, I'd have liked ye better, though I dinna ken if even he has one.”

“Oh, yes! he has a son, Geoffry,” answered Alan, absently, “who has just joined my regiment.”

“And his grand auld place, I canna remember its name?”

“Beechwarden.”

“Aye, Beechwarden. An’ will that go to John Dumaresque’s son?”

“I suppose so. He has only one daughter, besides,—my cousin Rosabel,” answered Mr. Dering, impatiently, family statistics being scarcely to his taste at that moment.

“Weel, weel;” and the old man woke up out of the dream he was weaving of possible consolation for Alan in the future, and turned now to wend his way home.

The dog capered on to Alan’s legs affectionately as he saw the latter take up his gun once more, and, sad to say, was rewarded for this attention with something rather like a curse and decidedly like a kick.

“I shall have a fair try, Lord Ercildoun!” called back Alan, half cheerily, half defiantly.

“Ye may. My daughter is a Ruthven,”

was the sole response, as Lord Ercildoun set his face homeward towards the grey and ruined tower where were spent the happiest hours of his grey and ruined life.

CHAPTER XI.

A WOMAN'S NAY.

"With all other men
 First love, though it perish from life, only goes
 Like the primrose that falls to make way for the rose.
 For a man, at least most men, may love on through life :
 Love in fame ; love in knowledge ; in work : earth is rife
 With labour, and therefore with love for a man.
 If one love fails, another succeeds, and the plan
 Of man's life includes love in all objects ! But I ?
 All such loves from my life through its whole destiny
 Fate excluded. The love that I gave you, alas !
 Was the sole love that life gave to me.

* * * * *

By the laws

Of a fate I can neither control nor dispute,
 I am what I am ! "

Lucile.

IT was scarcely one o'clock yet, but
 Alan Dering had been for more than an
 hour at the trysting-place appointed for

luncheon that day. By luck rather than good management he had contrived to kill two brace of birds, and decided that these would be quite as much as he could carry comfortably; so, to the immense disgust of the black setter, "Ben," a wiry, hard-working dog, who liked to run all day,—he wended his steps to the said trysting-place, and there sat down, trying to put in order his scattered thoughts before they should be called upon to face the ordeal likely to be in store for them later on.

The question which chiefly perplexed him was, *had* he any chance?

Not for an instant even did any thought of the "puir delicate lad" in foreign parts disturb his conscience, for what could a boy of eighteen, who had seen his promised wife but once, care for her in comparison to himself, who had lived

with her in daily and sweet companionship for nigh two weeks. No ! let the “blithe lad” retain his blitheness, but not by such means as these. And his dark rival looked most vindictively determined, as he sat there pulling off the poor crimson heads of each heathery spray beside him, and girding at the fate which had overtaken him at last, when least expected.

Vaguely his thoughts reverted to the past and to

“The loves and hours of the life of a man—

* * * * *

Hours that rejoice and regret for a span.

Born of a man’s breath, mortal as he ;

Loves that are lost ere they come to birth,

Weeds of the wave, without fruit upon earth.”

But their memory brings little save half regret and yet half cynical satisfaction at the very little he *had* ever loved in those days gone by. No sentimental leave-takings, no pleading letters long un-

answered, no wild reproaches to the lover "who loves and who rides away," have power now to stir his soul one whit; and whatever may have been Mr. Dering's sins in the past, they are most surely well avenged in this the present, as each moment he raises himself on his elbow to scan the horizon with the eager anxious glance of one who awaits another's coming with dire longing.

But the noonday sun is high in the heavens, and its warm rays rest lovingly on the dismembered and bleeding heads of Alan's heathery victims, and all is so still that even a hawk hovering high in the air above, has almost made up its mind to dare a pounce on the merry little yellow-hammer that sits pluming itself in the sun, ere a flutter of petticoats is seen in the far distance, advancing slowly over the rough broken road; and Alan starts

up with an eagerness which puts the hawk to flight for evermore, a sadder and a wiser bird.

“Ben” looked up with a low growl, quickly changed to a deprecating smile, as Cecil Ruthven drew near, and offered her well-laden basket to Mr. Dering with the laughing words—

“If you are as weighed down for want of your food, as I am with the weight of it, you’ll find plenty here to lighten your care, and mine too I hope.”

“How good of you to toil all this way with that heavy basket. Janet seems to have rationed us up for a week, by the look of its contents. Egg sandwiches too! My most coveted delicacy.” And both the young people sat down on the heather and discussed their luncheon as calmly as if no moral and mental thunderbolt were waiting to descend at any moment on their heads.

“Have you only shot two brace?” asked Cecil with surprise, when their repast was concluded.

“I didn’t try for any more, after I had got those. They’d be so heavy to carry, you see, and besides, I had something else to think of.”

His grave tone awed his listener, and her intended merry rejoinder died away on her lips.

“Cecil, will you listen to me quietly for a few minutes?” and Alan’s eyes were fixed on her face with a very reckless light slowly dawning in their depths.

The girl looked surprised at the sound of her name, but bowed her head in assent.

“I heard from your father this morning that you are engaged to Sir Francis Ruthven; I did not know it, I had not dreamed of such a thing!”

Again a look of calm surprise, as these hurried and disjointed sentences fall from Mr. Dering's lips.

“But, Cecil, it must not be, it *shall* not be! Oh, my darling, can you not guess how I love you, how every pulse in my heart beats for your sweet sake alone, and how can I give you up to another? Darling, *say* you do not wish it, that you will be mine, mine only,—never his?”

In truth, the absent boy is being shown small mercy now!

“But I cannot, indeed I cannot,” and honest tears stand in Cecil's clear eyes as she reads the despair creeping into those which are looking so anxiously into her own.

“Why not? You cannot love him, surely?”

A crimson blush spreads over the girl's face as she answers hesitatingly—

“I think I do. But what right have you to ask, Mr. Dering?” The old lord’s haughty pride of race shines out now on his daughter’s face.

“The right of a man who loves you as he loves nothing else in heaven or earth,” is the steadfast answer.

For one instant the girl hesitates. Surely, this indeed must be what men call “love;” could the “blithe lad” who was far away, ever offer her such love as this, the very breath of which seems to startle and rouse her from her childhood and maiden years? But yet, the absent boy had been very kind and loveable to her, and the few hours which she had spent in his society shone out in her desolate young life like a bright light seen in the gloomy twilight; and so she magnified this vague memory into a clear and beautiful reality, and come

what might, she must assuredly love him some day if not now.

So her words are low and decided, and no tremor shakes her voice, as she speaks the death-blow to Alan Dering's hopes—

“I will not dispute your right to speak any words you choose; but, Mr. Dering, I may not, *will* not listen. My father wills that I should marry my cousin, and I am content.”

“But could you not learn to love me, too, a little, Cecil—ever so little—and then choose between us?” Involuntarily the words brought to his hearer's mind the piteous petition for also a blessing, uttered by a defrauded brother so many centuries ago.

“No, I feel sure not.” And then as a recollection of her companion's undeniable charm of character crosses her mind, Cecil adds, “whoever in this world

ever learns to care for you, Mr. Dering, will care very, very much, I am certain; and *then* you will find a love worthy of you, but not till then."

"What do I care for the many, so I am robbed of the one only woman in the world to me?" retorts Alan Dering, bitterly. "Thank God, you at least do not offer me that last refuge of the destitute—*friendship*!"

"No," says Cecil, humbly. "I know that mine is not worth having."

"Oh, darling, forgive me! I would take even *that* much thankfully, fool that I am;" and something almost like tears stand in the pleading, desperate eyes which meet her own. After all he is but a boy still, and twenty-four years of life are scarcely enough to teach us how to show a callous front in dire pain. Perhaps, in all future time to come,

would Cecil Ruthven never again receive so pure and true a homage as those same tears in the eyes of her first true love.

"We two can never be friends, Mr. Dering, not for a long, long time," she replies sadly, wiser in her unsophisticated judgment than many a more worldly-wise woman would have been. Hers was a character which would never allow itself to be blindfolded, and then say, "I see not."

There is a silence of some minutes; then Cecil rises to her feet and prepares sadly enough to return home once more, with downcast face, like the very culprit that she feels. For had she not unwittingly done a mortal injury to one who had been so kindly a friend, so pleasant a companion to herself? And Cecil turns and looks back at him with anxious, irresolute eyes.

Then she goes quietly up to where he stands moodily apart, lays her hand on his arm and says with honest frankness, "Mr. Dering, indeed I would so gladly like you; I mean, as you *wished* me to like you," here there is a hesitating falter, and a crimson wave floods over the girl's pale face, "but somehow, I think I *cannot*—and—and there is my cousin to think of too, you see."

"Your cousin! He must truly care for you a deal, to waste every day and hour of his life far away from you," replies Alan, scornfully.

"He cannot help his delicate health," answers the girl with uplifted head and a touch of indignation in her voice. The weaker cause would always find a staunch ally in Cecil Ruthven.

"Perhaps not. But were I he, I'd risk losing the longest span of future

years which the gods might promise me, sooner than lose one single moment of life by your side, whilst I had it! Oh, darling, darling, have you no thought for my darkened life, for the weary years of living and longing which lie before me, for the dreary end of a loveless life? Is there *no* feeling in you?" and he clasped the girl's hand in passionate entreaty.

"How could I guess that you would care for me?" murmurs Cecil, in humble self-defence.

"How could any one live with you even a day, and *not* do so?"

"But there are so many others in the world besides me," urges the girl simply, trying vainly to point out a few mitigating facts for his comfort and consolation.

"I will have none of them!" is Mr. Dering's reckless and virtuous rejoinder;

and as Cecil does not fathom the improbability of this resolution being adhered to, she feels an even more terrible culprit than heretofore.

“ Well, I must go home now,” she said slowly; “ but if *only* I knew what to do or say to comfort you, Mr. Dering, how gladly would I do or say it ! ”

“ For God’s sake, don’t torture me, child ! ” burst out her listener with angry vehemence. “ Do you think that a stone is of any use to a starving man, when bread is denied him ? Ah, darling, forgive me ; I feel so utterly and madly miserable, that I no longer even know what I am saying ! Dear one,” and Alan’s voice now is quiet and self-controlled enough, as he goes on speaking, with both his hands clasped close over one small white one which vainly struggles to be free, “ I know that you are truth itself. I feel that you are

not as other women are, and that you will be all or nothing to whomsoever may love you, and I would not wish it otherwise. *How* great the happiness of him whom you must one day love will be I cannot dream of even ; I cannot fathom such unutterable joy ; I can only say, ‘ would God it were mine ! ’ But you cannot help it, dear one, it is no fault of yours, and so I must bend before my accursed fate as best I can.”

“ Aye, bend if it must be, but do not break ! ” and a proud, eager look crosses the girl’s pale face. “ I do not know much about these things,” she adds, wistfully and sadly, “ but I never yet saw a great grand pine-tree broken by the storm if only it bowed before it. There is the world, and there is life hidden in it somewhere,—it must not be wasted.”

Alan is silent, for he cannot fathom

this girl's strange nature, so bright and passionate in all dreams of life, so dead and cold to all dreams of love. Nor does he attempt to follow or recall her, as slowly she walks back on the homeward way, for what more was there to be said? The absent boy had won the day!

At an early hour next morning Alan Dering took his last look for many, many a year at Ercildoun's old towers, as the gaunt grey horse bore him swiftly and surely away from the place where he had suffered so keen a joy, so dire a sorrow.

The morning was dull and gloomy, no ray of sun could pierce through the dreary black clouds; and as wreaths of mist and sea-fog drifted slowly over the grand old ruined pile, winding shadowy grey arms round tower and turret, it looked like some enchanted fairy castle

slowly disappearing and dissolving into thin air at the touch of a wizard's wand. Grandeur in its departed glory, more desolate in its weird loneliness than speech could tell, as the very last of its ruined towers was slowly blotted out from view, Alan Dering experienced a strange feeling creeping over him as of one who had been living in some enchanted region full of haunted lives; and there was something almost like relief in his voice now, as lowly he murmured to himself, "Surely this *must* be the end of '*mon rêve!*' "

CHAPTER XII.

BRIGHTON.

"Behind him a Past that was over for ever ;
 Before him a future devoid of endeavour
 And purpose. He felt a remorse for the one,
 Of the other a fear. What remain'd to be done ?
 Whither now should he turn ? turn again, as before,
 To his old easy, careless existence of yore
 He could not. He felt that for better or worse
 A change had passed o'er him ; an angry remorse
 Of his own frantic failure and error had marr'd
 Such a refuge for ever. The future seem'd barr'd
 By the corpse of a dead hope o'er which he must tread
 To attain it."

Lucile.

"The doves are censured, while the crows are spared."

Translation from Juvenal.

MORE than two years had passed and
 gone, leaving but slight traces behind to
 track their way, when once again Alan
 Dering found himself brought face to

face with old friends, the very sight of whom carried him back in remembrance to the days he had spent in the wild "North Countrie," the memory of which had even yet some power to move him.

Not that Captain Dering, as his rank now was, had gone about the world a saddened and wearied man; not that even his best friend ever guessed how sorely deep had been the wound which he bore so silently and so well that none could tell the knife *had* "gone home;" yet in his dreams by night, in his thoughts by day, one face alone was for ever and ever before him, and do what he would its shadowy presence never left him.

At first he had welcomed it, and, with his fatalistic views of life, had looked upon it as a guardian spirit to be evoked at will; but time wore on, and he grew

harder and colder in his judgments as the visionary presence of his spirit-love grew less and less distinct. Even her trick of turning her head to look one full in the face when speaking, even the restless quiver of the sensitive lips when she was pleased or excited, even the clasp of her frank true hand, all these things were of the past now, forgotten as a dead man out of mind.

The days that were! Are there any, save the very young, to whom they are in reality the "golden past?" It is to be feared that to most in this world they have little glitter left, and that the links in the golden chain have a strange resemblance to the iron fetters of imprisonment. For each bright memory of health, happiness, and kindly, well-loved faces, there rise up others of long and weary hours of pain, of happiness which was

fain to have lasted a lifetime, and yet scarcely lasted a day, of friends who have forsaken us, of trust betrayed.

There is a problem hard to solve in youth, but harder still to solve as life goes on—whether memory be a curse or a blessing? Naturally, the answer would much depend on the “memories of the past” which each life holds; but apart from this, and given even the very brightest, it is still a question hard to answer! There are times when “dark memories” seem almost the happiest, for one may at least realize that they are all over and done with, and can return no more; whereas the thought of the “bright” ones brings with it a terror lest they shall fade, or a still wilder regret for their past and unforgotten sweetness in “the days that are no more.”

Whether memory were a curse or a

blessing to Alan Dering, he himself could scarce have said. That he had found the only woman on earth who should ever have sway over his soul, he knew; that he had found her only to lose her again, he could not, *would* not realize. Truly has it been said: "It is so strange; we see a million of faces, we hear a million of voices, we meet a million of women with flowers in their breasts and light in their eyes, and they do not touch us. Then we see *one*, and she holds us for life and death, and plays with us idly often— idly as a child with a toy. She is not nobler, better, nor more beautiful than were all those we passed, and yet the world is empty to us without her."

Vainly he tried to work himself into feelings of wrath and indignation against Life, Fate, all things, even against *her*; it was of no avail. Life might look

dreary, Fate might not shine on him, but the memory of clear true eyes and a frank, loving smile rent away the clouds from his heart and bade him remember that after all the world *was* fair.

It had been well could he only have also remembered the yearning after a nobler life, a life of work as well as pleasure, of power and strength in place of weakness and indolence, which had arisen so strongly in his heart when the might of a great love had awoken all that was noblest and best therein. But with the loss of his one great irredeemable stake, an indolent and yet reckless carelessness seemed to have come over Alan Dering's mind and soul; and though he had no longer "gold" left to stake, still he ventured the "silver" left him with careless prodigality on every turn of the great game of Life; and yet there was no plea-

sure in anything, no satisfaction to be bought on any side, and the requiem of each night and day was for ever the same—"this also is vanity."

To how many of this world is the earth in blank and utter darkness because *their* sun does not shine on them, and because they will have none other gods save that one alone? And it is strange to think that a heathen's prayer should most perfectly realize the ideal of a blessing which is longed for unutterably and yet as surely despaired of—"O for the jewel in the heart of the lotus!"

It was October, and the Brighton season was coming rapidly to its height. The heterogeneous mass of human beings which crowd it during the later summer months, had more or less disappeared; and that all-pervading element, which is rendered conspicuous by its money and

its profile, had returned to captivity in the counting-houses of mighty Babylon.

The 30th Hussars, now quartered at Brighton, were about to give a ball; and as Captain Dering and his Fidus Achates, Mr. Teddy Graham, stood leaning one afternoon against the rails which hinder promenaders on the King's Road from precipitating themselves on to the beach below, they passed in review the many matrons and maids who either walked, rode, or drove past their criticising eyes, with a view to ascertaining the quantity, not to say quality, of their impending lady guests.

Apparently they each and all found but little favour in Captain Dering's fastidious eyes, for he so derided the taste of his more easily pleased companion, that even Teddy Graham's imperturbable good temper became a little ruffled at last,

and he expressed his conviction, in somewhat terse and nervous English, that if Venus herself were to walk up and down the Parade, he, Alan Dering, would not so much as cast a glance at her charms.

“I daresay I shouldn’t, if she were dressed in the fashion of the day,” responded Alan with equanimity. “Of course, if she affected the costume in vogue at her receptions on Mount Olympus I probably *should* look at her with much attention, and so would the police, no doubt. But, Teddy, I’m very sorry if it hurts your feelings that I can’t admire those everlasting ‘fine women’ you are given to raving over. My idea of ‘a fine woman’ is the Fat Girl in a show, or a woman whom one can see half a mile off down a road.”

“Now look at that tall girl with the fair hair,—on the chestnut horse, I

mean ! ” bursts in Teddy with enthusiastic warmth, as a party of three or four persons ride leisurely past them ; “ did you ever see a better figure than *that*, now ? ”

“ No ; it’s not so bad,” acquiesced Captain Dering, more from a desire to please his companion than from any admiration which he felt for the fair blonde’s ample charms. “ But I don’t think that chestnut horse is quite up to her weight, Teddy, do you ? *I* should say, now, that he was an eleven-stone horse.”

Mr. Graham flashed an indignant glance at the speaker, and an admiring one at his fair one’s receding form, and then remarked discontentedly—

“ I can’t think what she can see in that great lout of a young lord who is always dancing attendance on her now. Did you ever see such an unlicked cub in

your life? And he's as big a fool as he looks, too, which is saying a good deal."

"Teddy, what fervour there must be in your Sunday morning devotions, when they pray that the nobility may be endued with 'grace, wisdom, and understanding.' Do you ever think of *him*?" enquired Alan, sympathetically.

"Think of the brute? I wouldn't waste a thought on him!" exclaimed Mr. Graham in hot indignation, and quite ignoring the fact that since the said "lout of a lord" had attached himself to the fair blonde's train, he, Mr. Graham, had been ignominiously ousted from his position as first favourite, and consequently had given that usurping sprig of nobility a good many more thoughts, not to say hard words, than he would care to admit.

"Halloa, Geoff, where are you off to

in such a hurry? Come here and help us criticise the natives," said Teddy Graham, laying his hand on the shoulder of a fair, gentlemanlike boy, who was hurrying past without perceiving them.

A vexed look crossed the latter's face, but it was quickly changed to an irresolute smile as he recognised his interlocutor.

"I'd like to, old fellow," he said hesitatingly, "but I'm afraid I can't wait now. Why, Alan, when did you get back?" he added in surprise, as he caught sight of his cousin.

"Late last night, Geoff," said Captain Dering, in the kindly tone which he always used to those younger than himself, and with whom he was invariably popular. "I like Alan Dering, he gives himself no airs, and yet stands no nonsense," was the general verdict of the junior members of Her Majesty's 30th Hussars with respect to Alan.

Geoffry Dumaresque was a well-looking young fellow enough, and to many his fair, girlish face would even seem to have a claim on beauty, of an effeminate type ; but physiognomists would have shaken their wise heads as they noted the weakness of his mouth and chin, and the irresolution expressed in the handsome blue eyes. Even the vacillating good humour to be read on his face told its own tale ; and the tone of his soft and hesitating voice stood out in great contrast to the strong, cheery one of Teddy Graham, no less than to the low, decided tones of Alan Dering.

“I can’t stay ; I’m awfully sorry, but I *can’t*,” and Geoffry Dumaresque took a step forward, then stopped and hesitated, as if considering a change of mind, and then finally went on his way once more.

His two brother-officers looked at each other significantly, and Mr. Graham began to whistle in a soft and chastened tone of dubious satisfaction.

“What’s up with Geoff?” asked Alan, quietly; “you know I’ve hardly seen anything of him, though he is my cousin; but I suppose that now we are in the same regiment I shall know him better.”

“What’s up with him?” repeated Teddy Graham, ruefully. “Exactly that which is at the bottom of most mischief in the world!”

“*Quelle est la femme?*” was Alan Dering’s laconic comment on this intelligence.

“That’s the worst of it. She’s not even a lady, and they say the young fool will in all probability lead her to the hymeneal altar too.”

“The devil!” exclaimed Alan, aghast.

"Yes, it just is the devil to pay, I can tell you; but the only consolation I get out of the business is that old Dumaresque will cut the young ass off with a shilling, and I know that you are the next heir to Beechwarden, etc., aren't you?"

"I believe so," answered Captain Dering, absently. "Teddy, I must look after this boy, and put a stop to all this tom-foolery, if I can," he added, earnestly. "Tell me all you know about it."

"Well, it began about two months ago, when you were away so long on shooting leave, and the girl belongs to a London circus which is down here for the winter."

"A circus! Do you mean to say that she rides bare-backed and jumps through hoops?" ejaculated Captain Dering, in utter dismay.

“No, no; not so bad as that, my dear fellow. She rides, certainly, but it’s on a saddle, and she’s always dressed in a habit, too. Her business is to show off the bucking and kicking part of the *haute école* style, and right well she does it too,” added Teddy, with grudging fairness.

“And do you know anything about what *sort* of a girl she is?”

“They say quiet enough. I know that nobody tries to make up to her without regretting it, for she can hold her own well.”

“Pretty?”

“Very, in a gipsy-sort of style. And the black horse she always rides is as near perfection as any light-weight hunter I ever saw; none of your pink-nosed, spotted devils, I can assure you! I tell you, my boy, it’s *very* serious, and

the sooner you or his other friends interfere, the better. Geoffry Dumaresque is a good-hearted lad enough, but as weak as water; if he wants this young woman, he'll try to get her somehow, you may depend; and if he happens to be in a softened mood, or it's after dinner, or anything dangerous like that, a woman's tear carefully shed at the right moment would extricate any number of promises of matrimony from him."

For a minute or two both men remained immersed in contemplation, pondering over what steps it were best to take in so intricate a matter.

"I should like to see her," said Alan, at last, decidedly; "then one could judge better of the dangers in the case."

"Well, come with me to the 'Royal Hippodrome,' as the proprietor calls it, to-night, and you'll certainly see her."

“All right, I will. Why, Teddy, surely that is your sister coming towards us now, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is. They live only three miles out of Brighton now; didn’t you know that?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You see, Grahamstown was always too damp for my mother in the winter, so they’ve let it for a year or two and have taken a place called Elmleigh, close by here. It’s all right for me, of course, as we’re quartered at Brighton, and so we’re one and all pleased, which is a rare occurrence in family circles,” concluded Mr. Graham complacently, as both men advanced to meet Mrs. Graham and her daughter, who were now approaching.

CHAPTER XIII.

MADGE LEE.

“The same dull toil—no end, no aim!
The same vile babble in mine ears :
The same unmeaning smiles :

* * * *

But now and then, her name will fall
From careless lips with little praise,
On life's parcht surface, shattering all
The dry indifference of my days.”

One Morning.

Two years had made little alteration in Mary Graham's kindly face, and it was with a sensation of real pleasure that Alan Dering met her good-humoured bright smile once more, as he received a most hearty welcome from both her mother and herself.

“Whenever you’ve nothing particular to do, mind you come over to us, Captain Dering, for you know we live quite close to Brighton now.”

“Indeed I will, gladly, Mrs. Graham. And my old friends Tosy and Posy, how are they?”

“Oh, quite well; but you must see them for yourself. Let me think—we’ve some people to dinner to-morrow night, and Teddy is coming, too; don’t you think you could drive over with him?”

“I should be delighted,” began Alan, and looked inquiringly at his friend.

“And it will ‘do me proud’ to bring him, mother; so you may expect us both in time for the feast. By the way, what time *do* you dine, Mary?”

“At a quarter to eight. And, Captain Dering, your cousin Rosabel comes to-day, to stay with us for a while, and so

you can make her acquaintance again, for you have not met since you were both children have you ? ”

“ No ; I shall be quite curious to see what she has grown into now, for she was only a pretty, fluffy-haired little doll when I saw her last.”

An almost imperceptible glance was exchanged between the brother and sister, favouring an idea that the same words which described Miss Dumaresque in her earlier years, would describe her as well in these her later ones.

“ Where are you both off to, mother ? ” inquired Teddy, presently.

“ We were going to walk as far as that big Berlin wool shop, right down the King’s Road, you know, Teddy ? ”

“ No, mother, my acquaintance with Berlin wool shops is very limited ; however, I shall escort you as far as that

emporium of bliss, for old acquaintance' sake;" and Mr. Graham takes his mother's feeble arm into his own strong young one, and mother and son pace on slowly together, whilst Mary Graham and Alan follow behind, talking over friends and scenes of the past.

Several times the name of Cecil Ruthven came to his lips, but always remained unspoken; even yet he could not say it with the unshrinking calmness of one to whom it was but an ordinary word. Besides, what need to ask about her more? It was six months now since an announcement in the newspaper had told him that Sir Francis Ruthven was married to Cecil, the only daughter of Thomas, ninth Lord Ercildown.

Mrs. Graham emerged from her woolshop at last, with a countenance of radiant satisfaction over the fleecy articles

purchased therein, and as Mary and her brother walked on first this time, Captain Dering saw and seized this judicious moment for approaching the subject which was still on his mind, encouraging his somewhat failing courage with the recollection of his kind old friend's general obtuseness, which he hoped would raise up a sheltering barrier to his own shyness.

“Miss Ruthven, did you say, Captain Dering? Oh yes, she's married; married her cousin, you know, that delicate boy who could never live in England. They're abroad again now, I believe, for his health.”

“Where was she married?” Do what he will, he *cannot* speak save in short and laconic sentences.

“Oh, at Ercildoun, by special licence, of course. It was a queer wedding altogether, for they asked no one to come to

it ; though I'm sure, poor girl, I'd have gone willingly enough if I could. It seemed so sad for her to be married off like an ordinary village girl, without either friends, or trousseau, or wedding favours, or anything nice and comfortable, you know."

"And Lord Ercildown, I heard that he had died almost directly afterwards?"

"Within a month of his daughter's marriage. They found him at early morning, sitting in some queer little tower of the old castle, where he spent most of his days and nights they say, quite dead. His was a strange life, Captain Dering. But, I forgot ; of course you know that well enough, for I remember you went to stay there after you left us two years ago."

"Yes, I did." He had not quite forgotten the circumstance even yet.

“And what was it like? And was Miss Ruthven nice, when you came to know her better? I always liked that girl, Captain Dering, since she came to that garden party at our house, do you remember?”

Yes, he remembered!

“She was so graceful, and shy, and natural, all in one; I thought of her often afterwards, and wished I could have her to stay, but the old lord would never let her come again.”

At this moment Mrs. Graham's carriage overtook them, and the two ladies forthwith took their departure homewards; whilst Alan and his friend returned to their interrupted occupation of studying the different styles of beauty submitted to their gaze, as each party of equestrians or pedestrians paraded past.

A few hours later on, both men saunter

into the gorgeously gilded building which rejoices in the appellation of "The Royal Hippodrome," and take their seats where a close view of the performers in that sawdust arena is ensured to them.

The evening's performance is more than half over; the clown has cracked his jokes; the pantaloon has cracked his skull; the star-spangled ladies on cream-coloured coursers have come and gone; and only one more *pièce de résistance* is there to offer to the public now. The dull thud of a horse's hoofs on boards is heard, the curtains are pulled back, and into the arena advances a girl on horse-back.

"That's her!" exclaims Teddy, excitedly and ungrammatically; and Alan Dering watches the new comer with interest.

Anything less "professional" it were

difficult to find, for the quiet black habit and neat hat of the rider were only in keeping with the plain double-bridle and unornamented saddle which adorned the horse. The latter, too, was a strange contrast to his other equine friends of the circus; well-bred, clever-shaped, with the free, easy stride of a thoroughbred horse, he walked round the arena with an occasional confidential toss of his handsome, lean black head, as if to say, "this is a different class of thing altogether, I can tell you."

That the girl in the dark habit was both well-known and popular, made itself soon apparent to all, for a storm of applause greeted her arrival, and much rapping of sticks from the "golden youths" in the front row fell on the ear.

She bowed in return repeatedly, but with a weary, distraught look, as if her

thoughts were elsewhere. Beautiful she was without doubt ; beautiful with the dark flashing beauty of her gipsy blood, and yet with far more refinement than is usually to be found in that same type. No paint, no rouge disfigured her bright, dark face ; and her lithe, active form seemed the very incarnation of wild freedom and grace.

But it was not her beauty alone that made the greatest impression on Alan Dering, as steadily he watched her every movement ; it was the softened, *loving* look on her face as if she were dwelling on some inward thought which was too pure and deep for the outer world's ken.

“Teddy, you were right ; that's a dangerous face,” says Alan Dering, low.

“I told you so, my boy ; and yet it's hardly one that your uncle would care to see reigning at old Beechwarden, eh ?”

“ Her name, what is it ? ”

“ Madge Lee. It’s a good gipsy name, but hardly good enough, I think.”

Now the band strikes two or three loud chords, and the black horse paces solemnly into the centre of the arena and stands still expectantly, both he and his rider motionless. Suddenly a merry clash of music breaks forth from the orchestra, and the horse bounds high into the air, giving an impression to the lookers-on in general that he has most certainly taken leave of his equine senses for ever and a day. Down to the earth he comes, only to leave it once more in a series of Australian “ buck-jumps ” that would have tried the nerves of even the most experienced stock-rider, but which seem powerless to shake the equilibrium of the slight figure on his back for an instant ; and he diversifies this performance with

occasional perpendicular rears, varied by some decidedly horizontal kicks. Louder and louder crashes the music in the orchestra, to a wild "Walpurgis nacht" tune, known to fame as "La dernière valse d'un fou;" and Madge Lee seems to have woken up to her work at last. The drowsy look has all disappeared, her face lights up with wild excitement and pleasure; and as the maddest plunge of all brings the black horse and its rider close under the spot where the two friends are sitting in state, a low, merry laugh, like that of a pleased child, falls on Alan Dering's ear.

"If I didn't know that she taught that brute herself, and if I didn't see that she keeps working him with her hand every minute, upon my word I shouldn't like it at all!" exclaims Teddy Graham, at last. "What a devil of a funk I should be in if

my first charger took to doing that sort of business," he adds feelingly.

The music ceases suddenly, and in an instant the "Prince of Darkness," as the black horse is not inappropriately named, stands motionless once more; and only his heaving flanks and distended nostrils tell of the frightful exertion which that fiendish equine can-can had in reality been to him. Madge Lee's face, too, is calm and quiet once more, and the old distraught look creeps over it again. Before half the rounds of applause have died away, she bows quietly to the applauders, then turns her horse's head, and rides out of the ring.

Alan Dering watches her with attention. He notes how careless is the glance which she gives to the admiring audience, how childishly fervent is the embrace she bestows on the good black horse,

when, through an opening in the curtain, he can just see her jump lightly off his back behind the scenes ; and he turns to his friend, as both rise to leave the place, with a remark which is the result of most profound conviction.

“Teddy, that girl will defeat all our plans ; she is too *real*.”

CHAPTER XIV.

BROWN EYES.

“Honour is courage, and that sweet self-forgetfulness which hastens to bear its own blame, and to accept the consequences of its own mistakes. Honour is that energy which rises to all the emergencies of life. Though, in nine cases out of ten, we are beaten by the material events of our lives, we can always be its spiritual masters. Against events, and their odd unforeseen combinations, we may be helpless enough, but against ourselves we can be all-powerful, and it is against ourselves that, nine times out of ten, the effort must be made.”

Author of Véra, etc.

“OH! please help me, will you?” And as Captain Dering saunters slowly along the beach by the “sad sea wave,” next morning, his reverie is abruptly interrupted by a piteous voice, whose owner is in some extremity.

The tide is coming in fast, and the boat in which the speaker sits has not only begun to float, but has swung out to the full reach of its short anchoring chain, and is bobbing up and down on the swell of the surge most unpleasantly.

“Of course! Don’t move until I pull the boat up as high as I can; you’ll be up to your waist in water if you jump out now;” and Captain Dering struggles manfully at the end of the chain, and finally succeeds in extricating the young lady from her moist, if not exactly perilous, position.

A glance suffices to show him that the rescued fair one is none other than Madge Lee herself; and he feels a decided satisfaction at this opportune meeting, which may assist him in gaining some idea as to the extent of the danger now threatening Geoffrey Dumaresque.

“How lucky for me that you came by!” exclaims Madge, joyfully, as she jumps lightly out of the boat. “I must have been asleep,” she adds, laughing; “for though of course I knew that the boat would float soon, the tide was ever so far off when last I looked at it.”

“I’m glad too, that I came by, Miss Lee.”

“How do you know my name?” and a quick, distrustful look crosses the girl’s face at his words.

“Because I had the pleasure of seeing you act, I mean—er—er——”

“You mean *ride*,” finishes Madge calmly, and cutting Captain Dering’s rather lame civilities ruthlessly short. “Of course, every one in the town knows me, I suppose,” she adds in a voice wherein pride and a sort of sadness fight for mastery.

“Don’t you like that?” inquires Alan, cautiously feeling his way.

“Well, I like the work itself,” answers Madge frankly, “and I wouldn’t like to think I had made a mess of it, and that no one praised me; but then, no one *does* praise me whose praise I care about.”

As Captain Dering is quite unaware of the fact that her nightly performance in the “Royal Hippodrome” is a source of unmixed aggravation to Mr. Geoffrey Dumaresque, an aggravation too which he takes no pains to conceal from her, he feels somewhat puzzled at the saddened look which crosses Madge Lee’s merry dark eyes for a moment.

But she soon forgets her grievance, and chatters on as gaily as before. Her instinct tells her that the man before her is a thorough gentleman in all ways, and

so the curt "good morning" which would have followed her grateful thanks, had she been addressing any man in her own rank of life, remains now unspoken. No fear of vulgar attentions or broad compliments being paid her here, she thinks, such as she has learnt to dread from the counter-skippers in the town, or even from "golden youths" in good society. And so she plays into Alan's hands unhesitatingly, and amuses him much by her shrewd, quick criticisms on things and people in general, whilst she also decidedly surprises him with the unmistakable refinement and superiority which she evinces over those usually to be found in her own station of life.

But the girl's true fascination lay in her strangely mingled character, a character which could be read at a glance, so clear and simple was it. Loving and

tender-hearted to the children and the weak ones on earth, passionate and reckless were her wild gipsy blood once roused, as careless of to-day as a bird in the air, as heedless of the morrow as a child at play, yet the proud self-respect of her race keeps her free and untainted in an atmosphere which would have proved fatal to most.

“And who are you, please?” she asks with a merry laugh.

“My name is Dering, and I’m in the 30th Hussars, which regiment is, as you know, quartered here.”

“Oh yes, I know;” and a pleased little quiver at each corner of the mouth tells a tale.

“Do you know any of my brother-officers?” inquires Alan quietly, firing the first shot into the enemy’s camp.

“No—that is—yes, I know one,”

answers the girl. And after an instant's hesitation, she adds shyly, "it is Mr. Dumaresque."

"There's no doubt she likes *him*," thinks Alan to himself, on whom the shy reserved tone in which she spoke the name, so different from her usual light gay accents, had made an unpleasant impression.

"Geoffry Dumaresque is my cousin," he says aloud.

"Is he?" and a look of eager interest comes over Madge's face as she inspects him with far greater attention than she has apparently vouchsafed his good-looking self as yet.

"He's a good boy is Geoff, but as weak as water," continues Captain Dering, leading up recklessly to the topic uppermost in his thoughts.

"He doesn't give one the idea of that," responds Madge dryly.

“Ah, but he is though! And it’s a great pity, too; for a lad like that, who ought to be heir to a great property, is the last that should run any risk of getting into scrapes.”

Alan feels that he is going to be rather hard on his young companion, and to be hard on any woman whatsoever goes sorely against his grain, but his heart hardens at her next question.

“Is Mr. Dumaresque *really* rich?”

“Oh no! he has very little now; but I mean that he ought to have a lot of money some day, when his father dies, unless——” and Alan emphasizes his words by a slight pause, “he does anything foolish enough to cause his father to disinherit him.”

By the sudden start, and the quick, anxious glance which he encounters from the girl’s dark eyes, Captain Dering feels

that his shot has gone home ; but *how* deeply home he little thinks.

“ You mean,” and each word falls slowly from the speaker’s lips in the monotonous tone which tells of a desperate struggle for composure, “ that if Mr. Dumaresque were to do anything which displeased his father, say that he married a girl whom nobody knew, or anything of that sort,—he would be ruined ? ”

Alan scarcely likes to meet the eager, wistful eyes which are raised to his own, and as he afterwards tells Teddy Graham, when recounting the whole interview to his friend, “ I *did* feel a brute ; but you see, as next heir, I was bound in honour to do my living best for the boy,” and so he does not hesitate.

“ Certainly ; a bad marriage would be fatal.”

“And what is ‘a bad marriage?’” bursts in Madge Lee, passionately. “Is it marrying a good, honest girl, who, though maybe she isn’t a lady born and bred, can love him every bit as much as if she is?”

“It’s not the girl herself,” replies Alan, gently, “it is that if her station in life were much lower than his own, there could be no happiness for *either* in such a marriage.”

“No happiness for *him*?” and a pained, despairing glance creeps into the dark eyes now.

“How could there be?” is Alan’s sole rejoinder.

There ensues a long pause, and when Madge Lee turns and confronts him at last, he fairly starts at the expression of her face. The sullen determination, the vehement passion, have all died out

of it now, and in their place is left a look of indescribable, resolute calm, such as makes Alan Dering say to himself, "that is the face of one preparing to renounce something great—she *will* give him up." Little does he know the depth of the renunciation which has brought that look on Madge Lee's face !

"Captain Dering, I understand you ; I understand your words better than you think ; but I'll not be the one to owe you a grudge for them, for you mean it well and kindly. Besides, I know that it is just for your cousin's sake you're speaking, and so——" the soft look of forgiveness in the girl's eyes speaks even plainer than words ; how easy is the task of forgiving *anything* done or said for that one dear sake !

Captain Dering remains silent, and Madge resumes—"But you need not

fear, for I'll save him yet ; and will take care of him ; aye, and maybe better care than many a fine lady in his own rank of life would," and the girl laughs loud in bitter scorn.

Alan Dering holds out his hand to her, "I thank you for his father's sake, and for his own too. God bless you, child, for your true woman's heart !"

Madge is sobbing piteously now ; all the fire has faded from out the large, dark eyes, and a broken look of despair sits strangely on her bright young face.

"Captain Dering," she says, at last, "if you hear hard things said of me—if I don't seem to do as I say, just at first, you must trust me on and on, it'll all come right in the end."

"I trust you fully," answers Alan, quietly.

As if the implied trust was sweet

and soothing to her proud young heart, Madge throws back her head once more and looks fearlessly into his grave, serious face.

“Well then, good-bye, Captain Dering. There is nothing more for us two to say.”

“But shan’t I see you again? Can’t I——”

“Help me, you were going to say. No; you can’t. What help could you give *me* without hurting *him*?” answers Madge, with bitter truth. “No,” she goes on more softly, “no one can help me now; but a good time’ll come some day if only I hold on!” And it is many a day ere Alan forgets the bright, hopeful look on the speaker’s face, as she turns and walks away from him, and is seen no more.

During their drive to Elmleigh that evening, Captain Dering confides the

result of this momentous interview to his friend and confidant, Teddy Graham, speaking in subdued tones, with due regard to the British bātman sitting behind them. And Alan feels chafed somehow, because the astute Teddy declines to believe in the honesty and good intentions of "the little circus-rider," as he calls Madge Lee, and so the subject drops for a time. Teddy Graham is a good fellow enough, but the higher and finer natures of this world are invariably beyond his powers of comprehension; and so he condemns them, not knowing.

CHAPTER XV.

BLUE EYES.

“To doubt her fairness were to want an eye,
To doubt her pureness were to want a heart—
* * * * *

Your beauty is your beauty. . . .
. . . . O grant my worship of it
Words, as we grant grief tears.”

Elaine.

A PLEASANT party of about twelve in all was congregated in the drawing-room at Elmleigh before dinner, when the son of the house and his companion were solemnly ushered in with due official announcement by a dignified old butler, who considered it evidently beneath him to claim previous acquaintance with Mr. Teddy Graham on any account.

They were all strangers to Alan ; three or four were relatives of the Grahams themselves, others he recognized as Brighton residents ; but each and all looked commonplace and uninteresting, and inwardly he groaned in spirit.

A country dinner-party was never Captain Dering's idea of bliss at the best of times, nor had he yet arrived at that age when the *chef-d'œuvre* of a *cordon bleu* was fain to outweigh all other considerations in his mind ; and so he had just made up the latter to the inevitable, and was preparing to be bored to death, when a pair of lovely blue eyes looked into his, and presto ! in an instant all was changed.

“ You are my cousin Rosabel, I know,” began Alan, somewhat eagerly ; and who would not have been eager to claim acquaintance with those liquid blue eyes ?

“I should have known you anywhere, I think, although it *is* so many years since last we met !”

“Should you?” and the bright, vivid blush on his cousin’s cheek showed plainly how much she appreciated this strength of memory.

Rosabel Dumaresque was lovely, of that there was no doubt ; lovely with the pure pink-and-white of a piece of porcelain, and eyes as large and blue as those of the shepherdesses painted on a Dresden vase. A tender-hearted, soft, foolish little girl in all things, made to be a toy and a plaything, but never a strong, true wife, or mother, or friend ; one whose sins would always be those of omission, never commission, and yet whose very weakness might bring much woe on the lives of others. It needed not the singular likeness to her brother in the weak mouth

and irresolute eyes, to convince all beholders that, beautiful though Rosabel Dumaresque was, her "face was her fortune" so far as all great mental attributes were concerned.

The dinner gong sounds; the stately butler appears once more and announces dinner, as if conferring a favour on the assembly at large, and Mary Graham, on whom this duty invariably falls, proceeds to pair her guests off suitably to their rank, age, and infirmities.

"Captain Dering," she says, when it comes to Alan's turn, and is obviously just going to join the name of an adjacent dowager to his, when a pleading look on Alan's face, and an anxious one on his companion's, catches her eye, and being good nature herself she instantly adds, "Will you take in Rosabel?"

"For what we are about to receive,

may our hearts be truly thankful!" murmurs Alan, *sotto voce*, as he feels his pretty cousin's arm safely in his own, and watches with awe the fat back of the receding dowager aforementioned.

Rosabel laughs prettily, and says, "You naughty boy!" She is aware of the fact that conversation is not at all her forte, and so she trusts a good deal to her beautiful face and musical laughter to make up for this deficiency.

When all were at last seated at table, and husbands and wives safely rescued from the calamity of sitting next to one another, etc., Captain Dering turned and made a careful and minute inspection of his newly discovered relative; and truly he found her fair.

Her black net dress fitted to perfection, throwing out in dazzling contrast her fair "fluffy" hair, and delicate rose-leaf com-

plexion; and as her colour came and went, and her blue eyes darkened and softened at each word which fell from her companion's lips, what wonder that he saw himself magnified into almost a demigod by her loving, deferential gaze, and, manlike, liked her all the better for it.

Truly was there here a most striking contrast to the frank, calm gaze of Cecil Ruthven, as clear and cold as moonlight on the water; why, then, should even now her memory return unto him; and why should a strange longing to wake up one instant's *life* in those beautiful, far-away eyes of hers, outweigh the pleasure of sunning himself in the unconcealed admiration plainly apparent in those of his present companion?

“How is it we have never met before, I wonder, Rosabel?” asks Alan, thinking what a pretty, soft-sounding name hers is.

“I don’t know. But I’m glad that we have met at last.” And the blue eyes steal another shy glance at her good-looking cousin.

“You are going to stay here some time, aren’t you?”

“Yes; nearly a month, I believe.”

“That’s all right. Then I shall see something of you. Mrs. Graham has given me *carte-blanche* to come over here whenever I like.”

“And you will come?” Oh, Rosabel, were you a wiser woman, you would e’en suppress the unmistakable anxiety apparent in that question; for is it not the way, all the world over, for the conquered to plead, the conqueror to grant?

“Need you ask?”

“I did not know if you would care to,” answers Rosabel, demurely.

“Of course I shall come,” is the

brief rejoinder ; but Alan's hazel-grey eyes had a way of saying more than his tongue, and the poor little girl feels thoroughly triumphant and satisfied.

Decidedly he is interested in this new-found cousin, and for the next half hour Captain Dering devotes himself to finding out her ideas on men, minds, morals, and the world in general. This is not difficult, for Rosabel has lived a happy and innocent life, hedged in by proprieties, and the records of her past are fair and clear indeed.

Alan—who has come to that state of life when fair blank pages seem immeasurably superior to those on which Fate has scored black letters full of life to some and of death to others—is quite content with his discoveries ; he heeds not the fact, that those same fair pages often mean that no one as yet has taken

pen in hand to trace any line or word upon them. In that day when the records of each life shall be read out and judged, perhaps the pages which are written over throughout, but on which each line is written fair and true, may hold their own with even spotless records of the past, to whom no stain has e'er come nigh !

“Have you seen your brother yet?” inquires Captain Dering of his cousin, when, dinner being well over, he finds himself sharing a comfortable and sequestered sofa with that young lady, “far from the madding crowd.”

“No, I wish I had, Alan ; I can't help thinking the poor boy has got into a scrape or something horrid ; for Mary looks so grave if I even mention his name now. Do tell me what it is, if there is anything wrong.”

"Oh, no; there's nothing the matter, Rosabel; at least, I hope not," answers her cousin.

"But what *is* it?"

"Oh, only a little flirtation of master Geoff's; nothing you need trouble your head about I assure you."

"But I can't help troubling about it, Alan. If his father thought he were silly, or—or—*wild*," here an expression of awe comes into Rosabel's pink and white face, "I don't know what he wouldn't do to Geoff!"

"Couldn't *you* make peace between them, *ma chère cousine*?" and Alan's eyes imply that surely anything could be done by herself.

"No, indeed I couldn't," sighs Rosabel helplessly.

"Well, time enough to try when it's really necessary, which I, for one,

think will never be the case. The girl he has lost his heart to is a right good sort, though she isn't a lady, certainly; and I think her own common sense and good taste will rescue the position."

"But those sort of people never have any 'nice' feelings," murmurs Rosabel, shaking her pretty "fluffy" head consolately.

A sudden vision of Madge Lee's proud dark face, wearing the same expression as when she had said to him, "It'll be all right yet, he *shall* be saved," crosses Alan's mind abruptly, and he opens his lips to speak up for the absent and defenceless, when Rosabel once more turns her lovely blue eyes on him, and inquires into his plans for the ensuing winter with a tender warmth which drives all other considerations from out his heart at once.

There was something so naïve and genuine about his pretty cousin's decided admiration for himself, that though her somewhat ostentatious evidence of the same, would have imperilled her chance of winning most men, Alan's heart, being still unconsciously sore with the memory of his first great losing hazard, was decidedly touched by this transparent devotion, so lovingly and sweetly tendered.

Also the process of being made love *to*, instead of making his own compositions in that line, had a very soothing charm to his indolent and dreamy disposition, hating trouble as if it were a cardinal sin; and therefore he devoted himself to her with increasing tenderness, and by the time all "good-nights" were exchanged, her lovely blue eyes had left an indelible impression on his memory, which accom-

panied him all the way on their moonlight drive home to barracks.

His silence and general absence of mind attracted even his companion's observation at last, though by no means of an observing disposition.

"Was that after-dinner claret corked?" inquires Teddy Graham anxiously.

"I don't know, I stuck to champagne," responds Alan absently.

"Then what is the matter with you? for I know that the paternal 'cham' is good enough for anybody!" exclaims Teddy, whose views of life are prosaic.

"There's nothing the matter with me, my dear fellow. By the way, Teddy, I think your rival, the 'lout of a lord,' has been sent to the right about at last."

"What makes you think so?" And Mr. Graham's ideas are instantly averted from the present.

“Oh, because I have met the blonde goddess riding every afternoon this week, and she has set up quite a new escort altogether.

“Who was it?” inquires Teddy anxiously.

“Sir W—— G——,” responds his friend, mentioning a name which it were little credit for any woman to have her own bracketed with.

“I give her up!” exclaims Mr. Graham fiercely.

“Why? Because the poor young woman is not superior to the attractions of what is called ‘a fashionable attachment?’”

Mr. Graham maintains a sulky silence, and Alan Dering continues speaking in a sort of quiet soliloquy.

“Of all things on earth to me the most contemptuous are ‘fashionable attach-

ments.' It is not that I look at them from the moral point of view and say they're *wrong*, but simply that as a rule they are so undefinably vulgar! Men or women seem never happy unless their especial weakness is made evident to the British public at large, and to all those whom they honour by the name of 'pals,'—and then they call that *caring*; they knew better in the days of old, I fancy, but now, is there left one single soul on earth which can realize that there is a higher side to love, 'life,' all things, than that portrayed by a fashionable attachment? "

Even as he speaks, the innocent blue eyes of Rosabel seem to look at him reproachfully; and as the dogcart rattles over the streets of Brighton, he not only finds himself making a mental reservation in favour of young girls who own blue

eyes and innocent faces, but also tries to stimulate Teddy to take him over to Elmleigh again on the following afternoon, ostensibly to try a new horse in harness, in reality to see those particular blue eyes once again.

And yet he was surely right when he said that it was "the days of old" which taught men and women to know and realize what was a true, pure love. *Now*, they drag the purest things on earth through the mire of public comment, and then wonder why they should become common clay,—of the earth, earthy. How can the loyal chivalry of old exist when what ought to be prayed for and given, is bought and sold? Truly, we *are* "a nation of traders," in this as in all else!

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